So You're Saying You Want to Marry Me?!
The DIRTY WAY to DESTROY the GODDESS'S HEROES
6
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SAKUMA SASAKI
Illustration by
ASAGI TOSAKA

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"And who out of these three would you want to marry?"
""""—Ngh!""""
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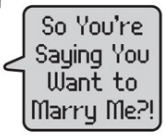
So You're Saying You Want to Marry Me?!

"Come on, Shinichi. I want you to make babies with me right now."
Oblivious to Shinichi's shock, Rino patted the bed, inviting him to come over.
Just as she reached the door, ready to leave, she spun around, lifting the hem of her skirt and curtsying with a gentle smile.
"From this day forward, till death do us part, I'll be in your care, Master."

Unlike her past self, she didn't try to skirt the question and instead sheepishly nodded back.
"Yeah! I'm going to become Shinichi's wife! Just you wait!"

The DIRTY WAY to DESTROY the GODDESS'S HEROES



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SAKUMA SASAKI

Illustration by **ASAGI TOSAKA**

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New York

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Translation by Jordan Taylor
Cover art by Asagi Tosaka
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School Hours

A Great Love Story

The Dirty Way to Seduce a Goddess's Ex-Hero

Illustration by Asagi Tosaka

Clean Up When the War's All Over

In the small village of Brassica, which was nestled in the mining country of Tigris, the residents continued to laze around, refusing even after sunrise to roll out of bed.

It was already winter, which meant this northern region was buried in a thick blanket of snow.

The potatoes planted in autumn had already been harvested, and the livestock had been slaughtered and turned into sausages and dried meats. They were ready for the coming of winter, which meant they had no reason to get up early to finish their tasks. In fact, parents would bark at their children to sleep inside instead of playing in the snow, since it meant stretching their food and kindling.

The silence of daybreak in Brassica was ruptured by a beastly howl.

"Grroaaaaaar!"

The walls of their houses started to shake violently, dropping snow from the eaves. The village chief jumped out of sleep, lurching himself from bed. He flung open the wooden shutters to observe his surroundings. What he saw chilled him to the core; his heart almost stopped beating in his chest.

In a field, a gray bear was charging toward the village, crunching snow underfoot.

A normal bear would have been a welcome visitor—the men would have rushed to prepare for the hunt, eager for the opportunity to bolster their winter stores. Unlike the dense forest, the field would have offered the men enough confidence to surround it and work together to take it down.

However, this creature had razor-sharp fur that stood on end like spears and long claws that curved like scythes. It was many times bigger than the average bear.

"I-is that…a monster?!" The village chief's wrinkled face dropped in fear.

Across the Matteral Mountains was the restricted zone—an area packed with mutated monsters. This one had found its way to civilization in search of food.

This was the third monster attack that the village chief had experienced in his sixty years. The first was in the summer in his childhood. The second, autumn marking the birth of his son, when he had turned twenty-five.

He remembered trembling in fear, tucked away in the small root cellar of his home, as the creature devastated the unharvested fields. He remembered the second attack like it had happened yesterday, even though it had been more than thirty years.

"This is bad…" The blood drained from his face, making it whiter than the snow.

Ravaging the fields had satisfied the monsters in the past two incidents; the villagers had been spared. Sure, they had almost starved to death, but they had persisted.

However, it was wintertime now. The fields were barren.

The gray bear would surely devour the potatoes packed away in the cellars and wolf through the piglets kept in the hutches, before hunting down the villagers hiding in their basements and slaughtering them until not a single human was left.

“W-we’re dead… That thing is gonna kill us!” shrieked the chief, knees giving out from under him.

“Keep it together, Pops!” His adult son sprinted out of his bedroom.

He’d been a wee baby when the last monster attacked, which left him with no memory of the event. He wasn’t overrun by fear. He reprimanded his father with composure.

“Remember what the Goddess gave us for times like these?”

“Oh! That’s right!”

The chief scrambled over to the dresser, and rummaged through the top drawer until he produced a pretty wooden box. Inside was a fist-sized crystal—perfectly translucent. A magic conductor.

They’d received it from the Goddess about a month ago. No one would have predicted they’d need it this soon.

“Um… How do we use this…?”

“If my memory serves me, I think it activates a *Telepathy* spell as soon as we charge it with magic. I think all we need to do is get people to touch it and call for help,” the son recited; his father seemed to barely remember.

“Let’s go!”

The chief herded up his son, his daughter-in-law, and their children, ordering them to touch the magic conductor together. At that moment, the magic was juiced out of their bodies, making them shiver and feel weak in the knees.

The magic conductor activated the *Telepathy* spell it was imprinted with.

“Please help us!”

“There’s a monster in our village. Please, save us!”

The family desperately shrieked into the crystal, as they could hear the bear’s feet crunching in the snow, slowly closing in on them. It turned toward the hut with their livestock, raised scythe-like claws, and—

“A bear, huh?” noted a deep voice.

The ground started to rumble.

“*Groooaaa—?!*” roared the bear.

The chief jerked his hand from the magic conductor out of surprise and dragged his fatigued body back to the window. When he peeked out in fear, he witnessed a blue-skinned giant standing against a field of stark white snow.

It was the new Goddess’s father, the Demon King, who had defeated Elazonia.

“Blue Demon King!”

The chief's family cried out in joy that someone had come to save them. Paying them no mind, the Blue Demon King Ludabite waited patiently for the gray bear he'd punched to get back up.

"Grrrrrr!"

"Hmm? Do you want to throw down? Love that you have fight in you."

Instead of turning tail and running, the gray bear stood its ground, letting out a low growl, earning praise from the Demon King.

The Blue Demon King charged his fist with more power. "The least I can do is give you a painless death."

"*Groooooaaar—!*" growled the gray bear incomprehensibly before launching its body at the Demon King.

However, his blue skin blocked claws sharp enough to cut through tree trunks. His diamond-crushing fist smashed into the bear's sharp fur, cracking its skull into pieces.

"—?!"

The headless beast didn't seem to realize it was dead, flailing its limbs for the last few times in its life before collapsing in the snow, never to move again.

"That's the Blue Demon King…"

The family had stiffened like they were made of ice, intimidated by his power.

Suddenly, the space above his head warped out of shape, producing a young girl with black hair—Rino.

"Waaaah?!" Gravity started to yank her down.

"Whoa there. Are you all right?" Her father gently caught her in his muscular arms.

"Tee-hee. My *Teleport* spells never go as well as yours, Daddy." She stepped softly onto the snow, grinning sheepishly.

The Demon King looked at her, concerned. "I can handle everything on my own, so you should get some rest."

"But you might have your hands full sometimes, Daddy. I want to help out. And…"

Rino paused, looking up at her father with an indomitable expression.

"I'm tired of being protected by you and Shinichi."

Her feebleness had cost her the life of a friend. She couldn't rescue the one person who needed saving. To prevent a repeat of that tragedy, she needed to be stronger in body and mind.

Tears streamed from her father's eyes as he witnessed such doggedness from his beloved daughter.

"Watching you grow up like this makes me the happiest man alive!"

"Oh, Daddy. You're so dramatic."

As he pulled her into a bear hug, weeping tears of joy, he shed the intimidating aura of one who had killed a monster in one blow.

On witnessing this, the chief's family let out a huge sigh of relief and pushed open the door to greet them.

“Blue Demon King, Goddess Rino, allow me to express our gratitude for your assistance,” said the village chief on behalf of everyone.

The villagers knelt behind him.

Rino smiled awkwardly. “Just lending a helping hand. Um, and I’m not a goddess or anything so magnificent. Please be less formal with me.”

“How humble…”

“Any wounds or casualties? Oh, I’m not trying to charge you money. Nothing is more valuable to me than a smile.”

Rino wasn’t being facetious. Nothing gave her more joy than helping others with no strings attached.

Well, the Dirty Advisor who encouraged her to take on this position had nothing but ulterior motives in mind.

As the Dirty Advisor once said: “There’s nothing more expensive than something free. If you pay someone for saving your life, you see their deeds as just another job. But if there’s no way to repay your savior, you’re indebted to them for life. Well, excluding thankless scum.”

No one—not Rino nor the villagers—had heard him say that under his breath.

Plus, as ordinary upstanding citizens, the people of Brassica had a propensity to feel indebted toward acts of kindness.

“The Saint was right… Love *is* free…”

“Hmm?”

“Lady Rino is the one true Goddess!”

“””Long live the Goddess! Love is everything!”””

“Whaaaa—?!”

The villagers started to chant the holy words spread by one perverse Saint.

Rino clung to her father’s arm, alarmed, and appealed to him. “Daddy, tell them I’m not a goddess!”

However, the Demon King was smiling smugly, happy to see them worshipping his beloved daughter.

“Humans, I urge you to spread word of my daughter to all corners of the world. In exchange, I promise to protect your lives!”

“…Daddy?!”

“””Raaah! Goddess Rino is the best! Cuteness is justice!”””

No one heard Rino’s desperate pleas for them to stop as their chanting reverberated across the stark white fields of snow.

The demons had managed to rebuild the castle in Dog Valley, which Elazonia had obliterated two months prior and now stood under a dusting of snow.

The dining hall welcomed the return of the Demon King and Rino, who had finished hunting the monster in Brassica Village.

“Bwa-ha-ha. That was easy!”

“We’re home…”

When Shinichi Sotoyama saw the Demon King grinning from ear to ear at his fatigued daughter, the Dirty Advisor picked up that something must have happened on their trip.

“Welcome back. Seems like they worshipped you again.”

“I mean, we’re so famous now,” Arian added with a pained smile. The half-dragon redhead was sensitive to these things.

After all, she’d become known as the hero who had defeated Elazonia, so she got mobbed by fans whenever she went into town.

“I guess it’s better that they aren’t scared of us, but I wish they’d treat us normally.”

“Yeah… I just wanna be friends…,” Rino agreed, teary-eyed.

The dark elven maid was setting up breakfast—soup and bread—in front of her.

“It would be hard to get them to stop,” Celes commented. “The humans are utterly convinced that Lady Rino is their savior.”

The maid looked as proud as the Demon King. After all, it felt pretty good to have her mistress—who she saw as basically her younger sister—revered by humans.

“Besides, isn’t this what Lord Shinichi planned?”

“Could you stop blaming everything on me?” Shinichi protested, but he was the one who suggested they supply the magic conductors for emergency contact to the nearby villages.

Without Elazonia, the heroes had lost their immortality, which meant they were avoiding fighting monsters like the plague.

Obviously, there were courageous heroes still putting up a good fight, as well as monster hunters and armies deployed by other countries that had never had the luxury of immortality when battling monsters anyway. It wasn’t as though the beasts were doing whatever they wanted.

That said, there were certainly fewer people capable of fighting the monsters. Large metropolises with defensive forces might hold out on their own, but it was easy to imagine smaller villages would be taking the brunt of the damage.

Hence, Shinichi’s decision to distribute the magic conductors.

His reasoning was obvious: to improve public opinion of the demons.

Even though the demons have gotten a boost in reputation after taking down the “Evil God” Elazonia, the people haven’t completely stopped being suspicious of them, he mused.

Quite the opposite, in fact. There was a chance that the humans might band together to attack the demons—their newest threat—since they were powerful enough to defeat Elazonia.

To turn this situation in their favor, the demons needed to not only defeat the monsters to prove they were allies of justice, but also parade around the “Goddess Rino”—someone almost too cute to be a demon—as she healed the public and entertained them with her songs.

I feel terrible, but she’ll need to keep up this act for the time being.

Well, some pervert had already taken it upon herself to spread the good word, and Rino’s act of heroism had been broadcast to the entire continent,

which meant Rino was already god-tier at this point without much intervention on Shinichi's part.

That's right! This is all that pervert's fault! Shinichi cried internally.

Celes read his thoughts. "And who was it that made her into a degenerate?" she asked telepathically. "Who left her to create her little religion? Who broadcast the events to the entire continent? Wasn't that you?"

Take some accountability, she wanted to say, but Shinichi brushed her off.

Speaking of the Saint Sanctina, she had already started her little sermon in Boar Kingdom, having set off early in the morning to make her trip south. She certainly knew how to put on an act, which allowed her religion to make moves in the country.

"I've already concocted a plan for you to make friends. Would you mind playing Goddess for the public good?"

"If it's for you." Rino nodded, blushing, as Shinichi stroked her hair.

Next to pouty-faced Arian, the Demon King seemed unhappy with this turn of events.

"I can accept the humans praising Rino, but I don't like that they cry out for help without even attempting to take a monster down. They should put up a fight—even if it costs them an arm or a leg."

"Don't be ridiculous," Shinichi warned.

The Demon King needed to stop evaluating the world on demon standards.

He snapped back angrily. "But all these emergency calls take away from my playtime with Rino!"

"It always comes back to that!"

"Daddy…"

Shinichi and Rino were starting to get tired of this helicopter parent, one who prioritized time with his daughter over people's lives. That said, there was a grain of truth in his statement.

"It's nothing too crazy now—only about twice a month—but I imagine we'll be swamped once other areas request our protection," Shinichi said.

As of right now, the only two countries with magic conductors were the neighboring country of Boar Kingdom and the allied country of Tigris.

They didn't want to overextend themselves, since they didn't know how often monsters were spotted in these parts. That wasn't the only reason for limiting the areas, though. They might catalyze a war if they reached out to unfamiliar territories.

The citizens would readily agree to receive the protection of the Demon King and Rino, as long as they weren't bigots. But it wouldn't be so easy with the ruling class.

Noblesse oblige. The royalty taxed the people because they bore the responsibility of guaranteeing the safety of their subjects. A new bodyguard

—the Demon King—meant the citizens would think the royalty served little purpose.

It would be unwise for the ruling class to let the Demon King intervene in their affairs. What would happen if their subjects started appealing to the Demon King to save them from the corrupt ruler?

It only worked with Tigris because we've been on good terms and Boar Kingdom because they're afraid to resist after seeing the Demon King firsthand. Any other place would start a needless war.

Unfortunately, there weren't many rulers cowardly enough to surrender without a fight or intelligent enough to recognize they wouldn't be able to win.

Even if it meant helping the majority, overthrowing the royal few was an act that would place a heavy burden on kindhearted Rino. Plus, Shinichi was neither nice nor arrogant enough to want to save all the people of the world.

I can't stand by if there's a massacre or something, but there's no real merit in broadening our reach otherwise.

The demons had fulfilled their original goal of procuring decent food by importing goods from Boar Kingdom and Tigris.

I'd be willing to go to war for rice and fresh fish…

"You've gotten offtrack again, Lord Shinichi," Celes warned, reeling him back in, as she set down a glass of water in front of him. He had a bad habit of getting lost in his thoughts.

"Whoops. My bad." Shinichi hydrated his parched throat with a gulp of cold water. "There's two ways to reduce these requests. One way is for you to go to the restricted zone and thin out the monster population, Your Highness."

"Hmm. A decent proposal." The Demon King seemed to be on board, even though it just meant piling on the work early. "I've been training harder since I lost to Elazonia, but I think I'm at my upper limit. This would be a good change of pace."

"You *still* consider that a loss…?"

"Naturally. I don't even need to speak about the battle when Rino was taken hostage. And the second one was hardly a win." He furrowed his brow.

Arian smiled uncomfortably. "I'm not exactly proud when I think about that victory. I wouldn't call it a three-versus-one brawl—more like a melee of ten thousand against one."

Technically, three individuals—Arian, the Demon King, and Regina—exchanged blows with Elazonia, but Celes, Sanctina, and hordes of humans and demons were the ones to spread knowledge of the "Goddess's" true form and shut down her magic supply.

"It isn't true strength unless you win in a fair fight—one-on-one," said the Demon King.

"I see your point."

But a win is a win, even if you pull the dirtiest tricks in the book! Shinichi added internally, which is exactly what set him apart from the Demon King.

"I will never be able to challenge the Red Dragon if I cannot even surpass Elazonia." The Demon King could hardly wait.

"So you haven't forgotten about that…" Arian grimaced.

She couldn't imagine anyone winning against the Red Dragon—her father and a Proxy of the Planet—but there was a part of her that hoped and feared the Blue Demon King would manage to wound him, even though a nuclear bomb had failed.

"Above all, I wouldn't want my wife to be ashamed of my abilities."

"I wonder what Mommy is doing right now…," Rino mused, face clouding over.

Her mother—Regina, the Blue Princess of War—had set off on another trip after taking down Elazonia. This was just her little quirk, but it didn't ease Rino's heart, knowing that her mother was trying to find the White Dragon and Green Dragon in the continent of Uropeh.

"I hope she isn't upsetting some other humans…"

"Oh, that's what you're concerned about." Shinichi chuckled. Rino must have assumed Regina was fine.

"Anyway," he turned back to the Demon King, "if you can train by culling some beasts, it would help reduce monster attacks in nearby villages. Obviously, in *moderation*. We wouldn't want you destroying the ecosystem."

"Leave it to me. What was option two?"

"Simple. The humans can get strong enough to defeat monsters. I'm already working on that theory."

Celes brought over his coat and bag from the corner of the dining hall when she saw he was on his feet.

"Are you going out with Celes again?" asked Rino.

"Yeah, we're going to Tigris and the Holy City today."

"Hmph. You're always going out there…," Rino pouted, since it encroached on their playtime.

"Strange that we're busier now that things are peaceful," noted Arian, pursing her lips and hoping for more time with Shinichi.

He smiled apologetically. "You can make a mess in an instant, but it takes time to clean up."

Defeating the Goddess who had controlled the continent had set off a domino effect of changes, for better or for worse. It was far more difficult to build peace in that situation than it was to start war.

"Well, I'll deal with the worst of it by spring. Then we can have a picnic under the flowers."

"Under flowers?" asked Rino.

"We'll throw a huge party and eat well!"

"That sounds fun!" Rino squealed in delight.

"Could you think up the menu, Arian?"

“You got it!” Arian seemed to sit up straighter.

After waving to the two girls, Shinichi donned his coat and left the dining hall.

Celes trailed after him.

“Your worries never end,” she whispered in his ear.

“Just part of an advisor’s job.”

As they made their way down the hall, Shinichi lamented that all he wanted was to take a long soak in a hot spring to unwind. He sounded like an overworked employee.

Even when snow piled high, the mining country of Tigris never stopped grinding.

For those working in the primary industries of mining and smithing, the cold weather was a welcome respite for their humid workplaces, and they could be heard vigorously hammering away.

From a window in the castle’s drawing room, Shinichi and Celes looked down into the busy city.

“Apologies for thy wait.”

Someone apologized as soon as the doors swung open. There was the husky captain—the young King Sieg—and Dritem, the severe middle-aged court mage.

“No problem,” replied Shinichi, noting the long, thin box in the court mage’s hands. “Seems like it’s done.” His lips curled up happily.

Sieg nodded, seeming solemn. “I myself have tested it. ’Tis beyond my expectations.”

“Indeed,” the court mage agreed, opening the lid to show its contents.

Inside was an object resembling a crossbow, made of a long metal tube, fit onto a wooden stock with a metal trigger. It was a new weapon that used the explosive black powder that the people of Tigris had gotten their hands on in the past few months.

In other words, it was a matchlock rifle.

“It’s shorter than I was expecting,” observed Shinichi, taking it into his hand.

Its total length was just over fifteen inches.

Sieg seemed apologetic. “Whilst thou explained that longer barrels can fire farther, we are little experienced in forging metal tubes so straight. There was need to create tools specific to forging the weapon.”

“It makes sense. It’s totally different from making swords and armor.”

Shinichi, the one familiar with the matchlock mechanism, was responsible for drafting the simple design specifications for Sieg. However, he didn’t know the first thing about forging iron into a metal barrel for a gun. He was aware the matchlock eventually evolved into a fully automatic rifle, but knew nothing about the machinery necessary to produce them.

That meant they could take no shortcuts, even if he had ideas from the future. That was why the smiths had to build from the ground up—and had lived up to Shinichi's expectations by forging him this gun.

"Can I test it?"

"Shall we move to the courtyard?" Sieg suggested, escorting them out of the room.

It seemed like the courtyard had already been used to try out the gun; there was a holey log propped up as the target.

"I assume you don't need to be walked through the steps," noted the court mage.

"No, but this will be the first time I shoot something." Shinichi chuckled, accepting a bag of gunpowder.

He poured it into the barrel's end and stuffed in a bullet, pressing it in carefully with a wooden rod. He packed more powder to the flash pan on the back of the rifle before lighting the match used for ignition.

"It requires quite the setup," remarked Celes.

"And has a high return."

Shinichi gripped the gun firmly in both hands and pulled the trigger. *Bang!* The bullet lodged itself into the log almost sixty-five feet away.

"Nice. A clean hit. I was worried about making a fool of myself as the inventor."

"Magnificent. His Highness wasn't even able to hit one out of five shots."

"Dritem, thou shall remain silent on such matters!"

Dritem dodged King Sieg's fist, clapping in glee as he exposed the king's secrets.

Celes covered her long ears with her hands, face strained. "My ears are ringing after hearing it so close. Will this become similar to the thing we encountered in the Elven Tomb?"

She was talking about the automatic rifles held by the guard golems, left behind by the ancient civilization in the underground shelter.

"Give it another fifty years." Shinichi blew the smoke from the muzzle, chuckling that it wasn't impossible.

If firearms of that caliber spread throughout the world, the power balance between humans and monsters would turn on its head.

"And when that happens, the Demon King and Rino won't have so much on their plates."

"Way off in the distant future…," Celes grumbled.

"Not exactly. Even this gun can inflict wounds in vital areas and ward off monsters with its sound and smells."

Celes didn't seem too convinced. If Shinichi was being totally honest, he didn't buy it, either.

We'll need higher-caliber rifles to fight against monsters. I want to join hands with a dvergr and spend the next three years tinkering with guns, but…

It would be ridiculous to try and speed-run the advancement of guns—which had taken three hundred years on Earth—but it could be possible if they were just talking single-shot rifles.

I would have to leave everything with the Demon King for the time being, but we could reduce his workload if we gathered humans and demons to form monster extermination squads. Might be good to invite the beast morphs from Mouse Village, too.

A number of candidates flashed through Shinichi's mind as he passed the gun back to Sieg.

"Can you continue producing these guns this winter and start to sell them to neighboring countries once the snow thaws? They're not the best for monsters, but they can be used to hunt, and they'll prove valuable in battle, so any soldier with a good head on their shoulders will jump to have one."

Sieg's expression was complicated. "I understand we will make great riches, but…"

"I gather you're worried they'll catalyze wars and cause human casualties?"

"Indeed." Sieg rubbed his chubby stomach and nodded unhappily.

Behind him, his court mage had assumed the same expression.

"I can understand where you're coming from. With one gun, women and children will be handed enough power to kill a soldier, which means more people will die in war."

Shinichi could admit these dangers. He'd learned what had happened with new guns, tanks, fighter jets, and missiles on Earth, after all.

"But you have *Resurrection* in this world. You don't need to be so averse to war. And this sounds weird, but guns are better suited to kill others in a resurrectable way," he claimed.

In the world of Obum, any living entity could be resurrected as long as at least half their brain was intact—which was the only thing that set them apart from the Goddess's heroes, who could be respawned from nothing.

While using swords and magic risked damage to the brain, using guns was almost humane in that they killed with the smallest of wounds.

"We'll probably need regulations against the use of expanding bullets that scatter inside the target and anti-material rifles that can blow away humans by grazing against them, but that's a discussion for a later time," Shinichi said.

"…I cannot even picture these things." Sieg looked troubled as he gazed at the matchlock rifle in his hands.

Shinichi had revealed he was from another world with new scientific discoveries, so Sieg didn't doubt his absurd statements anymore. However, it was near impossible to imagine the wars these newly minted guns could bring, the scope of their damage, and any future variants.

Seeing Sieg struggle to conceptualize this, Shinichi instantly regretted jumping the gun.

“One more thing,” he said. “Making a weapon won’t cause war. Even without guns, people would fight with swords. Or clubs. Humans cause wars. Besides, they’ll always have magic.”

There were humans who were magic users, though they were few and far between compared with demons. They were living weapons. Thinking removing all weapons would bring world peace was as fantastical as the end of humanity.

“If someone really wanted a war, it would make more sense to recruit all the magic users who’ve distanced themselves from the Goddess than to stockpile guns. Well, I guess then the mages would take over the country. No ruler lacks that amount of critical thinking.”

“Verily,” said Sieg, wincing, like this was a sore spot.

Tigris Kingdom had a total of five magic users headed by the court mage Dritem—a sizeable amount, compared with its neighboring countries. Magic users were the ultimate weapons since they didn’t need to be armed to kill a soldier in armor.

Plus, they could uncover secrets with *Clairvoyance* and *Wire Tap*. Not many rulers were brave enough to keep a magic user at their side, since it wouldn’t take much to threaten or kill them.

“Getting back on track—No war is going to start because you sold some guns,” Shinichi assured him. “Quite the opposite. You might be able to *stop* battles by supplying countries with a weapon that can outdo magic users.”

“I see, thou hast considered that as well.” Sieg nodded, instantly on the same page.

However, Celes had no idea what they were talking about. “Selling weapons to stop wars? How?”

“No, it’s the opposite. If you *refuse* to sell weapons, you can hold it over other countries and control wars.”

Shinichi launched into a full-fledged explanation, since the demons might find this difficult to grasp as they had no need for guns.

“First, guns are going to become a big deal on the battlefield. While you can *buy* as many guns as you can hold, these almighty magic users are harder to come by.”

Shinichi’s standards were out of whack because he’d gotten too comfortable with the presence of the Demon King and Celes, but the fact of the matter was that the world was sorely lacking magic users capable of fending off projectiles with *Missile Protection*.

Maybe the bishops of the Goddess’s church could pull it off, but they weren’t constantly casting *Defense* spells, and it was obvious their magic would run dry if they were shot with hundreds of bullets.

“Once guns are made available, victors will be decided by their technical capabilities and economic resources to prepare large quantities of better guns.”

As someone once said, “there’s power in numbers.” Those who stood at the top of society had the power of money to gather those numbers.

“The problem is, the countries without guns will always be the losers. If there was a country that wanted to wage war—”

“’Twould be simple for Tigris. We who hold the secrets to manufacturing both guns and gunpowder would threaten them—by refusing their business.”

“You could even say you’re only selling guns to their enemy nation.”

“Oh-ho-ho, Sir Shinichi. Thou art quite the scoundrel.”

“Not as much as you, Your Highness.”

Sieg’s stomach jiggled as he laughed, and Shinichi rubbed his hands eagerly.

Celes looked fed up with Shinichi trying to butter up Sieg. “Do you really think it will go that well?”

“I have the same concern,” said the court mage, taking the gun from Sieg’s hands. “This requires trained smiths, but it’s not so complicated that others couldn’t make imitations. And our trade secret for gunpowder will get out eventually. Even if we stop providing the guns, won’t other countries just start making their own?”

“Of course. It wouldn’t take long before they start making copies. It’s a threat to national security to rely completely on another country to make your weapons.” Shinichi flashed his usual evil smile. “However, it’ll take them a few years to make inferior copies, while Tigris will be making even better guns!”

After the matchlock was the flintlock, which used flint for ignition. The simple lead ball would become the acorn-shaped bullet, the Minié balls. That would drastically increase the guns’ force, range, accuracy, and firing speed. The old gun design wouldn’t stand a chance.

Next, they could develop cartridges and smokeless powder, bolt-action, then pump-action, semiautomatic, full automatic. There was still a long way to go.

“As long as there are no super geniuses like John Browning, I can get Tigris running so far ahead, other countries will never catch up!”

“Who?”

“The god of gun development. I wish I could summon him here from Earth.”

If they got John Browning on Obum, he’d make Shinichi’s progress look like a joke.

“Anyway, Tigris will have a lot of say, just by making cutting-edge guns. Plus, you’re backed by the Demon King, who can’t be defeated with guns. Forget controlling wars on the continent—You could achieve world domination if you put your mind to it.”

Shinichi smiled devilishly, inching closer to Sieg.

“And if that happened, you could pick the prettiest girls to make the best idol group.”

“Th-that is a most splendid idea!”

“Well then, sign this contract, and you’ll become the ruler of this world!”

“I shall do—*Gagh!*”

“Enough, Your Highness.” The court mage silenced Sieg with a fist to his face. “Some things should not be joked about.”

“Ow… Why must thou strike me if thou wast aware it was naught but a joke?” Sieg pouted, but his expression turned serious again as he looked at Shinichi. “With that, I must graciously decline thy offer.”

“Yeah, sorry for taking it too far.” Shinichi bowed to the king, who was in on the joke.

Celes sighed. “What would you have done if he’d agreed to conquering the world?”

“Depends on what Rino would say.” Shinichi wasn’t joking anymore. “I hate to sound like a certain Goddess, but we could help billions of people by unifying the continent, even if it meant spilling blood.”

Establishing one united country didn’t solve the problems of terrorism and civil wars, but it would drastically reduce the battles that occurred on a smaller scale.

“The biggest benefit would be standardizing language, currency, and units of measurement. Like, who the hell came up with inches, feet, miles, yards…?! Why can’t we all just measure in meters?!” Shinichi screamed on behalf of all creators on Earth.

“Please control yourself,” snapped Celes. “I don’t get it. Is it really that important?”

“Yeah. Imagine how efficient it would be to have standard units of measurement… But I guess those inconsistencies are part of culture, which is why they’re so against it.”

If he was told to give up Japanese and speak exclusively English for convenience’s sake, he would have some qualms. After all, how could he express himself if he was strapped to the limitations of the English language? Efficiency wasn’t the only important thing.

“Sometimes, conflict stems from miscommunications because of differences in languages. If you really wanted world peace, you’d need to either create a universal language or create a perfect translation machine and—”

“Lord Shinichi, reel it back in.”

“Oh, right.” Shinichi got ahold of himself.

Uropeh didn’t have vast differences in its languages anyway. Even comparing what was spoken in the far corners of the continent, they could be called dialects of the same language. Plus, with translation magic, there was little incentive to standardize it.

“There are merits to world domination, but I don’t want to force a certain culture on people, and I wouldn’t want to make Rino rule with violence.”

“Which is why thou hast warned us in advance, for thou hast given just the power we would need for world domination.”

Sieg wasn't blaming Shinichi. In fact, he smiled gratefully. He'd seen what great power does to people—especially with the tyrants of the church. He'd been worried that they might abuse their newfound power, but…

"With Sir Shinichi's cautious words of advice, and as long as Rino sees it well to watch over us, I have no doubt we shall never stray from a moral path."

"Uh-huh."

Sieg patted his rotund stomach with a smile. Shinichi grinned back. Rino acted as a central pillar of morality, not just for the Demon King—but also for the rest of them. They had unintentionally found themselves in a pseudo-religious situation: They couldn't do anything wrong because "God" was always watching over them.

"I don't want to think about what would happen if something bad were to befall Lady Rino," said the court mage.

"Absolutely." Celes nodded.

Dritem broke into a sweat just thinking about it.

After checking a few other things, Shinichi and Celes left the castle and headed to the church's cathedral.

They'd heard rumors that people had trashed the churches run by greedy priests, but that clearly wasn't the case with the Tigris Kingdom Cathedral, which almost glittered under the light.

"No problems here." Shinichi relaxed as they went into the cathedral.

A burly holy warrior nearby came barreling over happily when he saw them.

"Oh, Sir Shinichi! Hello, stranger! It's been a whole month! I missed you so much, I've been crying."

"If you want me to see me more often, you should stop talking like that." Shinichi winced.

The macho warrior's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Ouch! But you're the one who summoned an incubus and made me this way…"

"It's your fault," snapped Celes, rolling her eyes.

"My bad." Shinichi regretted it.

He still strongly stood behind the belief that it was easier to brainwash than to kill the enemy, but he never imagined his own tactics would come back to bite him in the ass.

"Is the bishop in?"

"Uh-huh. Yup."

The warrior led Shinichi and Celes to the prayer room farther inside the cathedral.

In it was the man who had converted from worshipping the "old hag" (his words)—Elazonia—to the "petite young miss"—Rino.

Juda had become the bishop in charge of the Tigris Cathedral. Right now, he was delivering a sermon to the children and elders who'd gathered to offer their prayers.

"As our Goddess Rino teaches, cuteness is justice. That's not to say someone's appearance determines whether they're good or evil. Her word urges you to work on your inner self—so you're loved by others, instead of being the one who just loves others."

"*That's* what you got out of that message?!"

Shinichi had full-body chills when he discovered that phrase he'd said offhand—ripped from a certain manga—had become some kind of holy mantra.

Juda noticed Shinichi and looked up happily.

"Rejoice. Here is the very first follower of our Goddess Rino. Please welcome Father Shinichi, the greatest missionary to us all—and lover of little girls."

"Hold it!" Shinichi was desperate to rebuke the last title, but the followers had already swarmed him.

"Wow! It's the real Shinichi!"

"When will Lady Rino have her next 'sermon'?"

"I would love to go on a pilgrimage to Her Holy Residence. What do you think would make a good offering?"

"Quiet, please! I promise to answer your questions another day!"

Shinichi was handling the crowd like a seasoned worker at a concert venue. He didn't have it in him to flat-out refuse the pressing throngs of children and the elderly. He somehow managed to get the believers to go back, while he glared at Juda with tired eyes.

"I'll remember this."

"But I have nothing but respect for another man of culture!"

"And that's what's stressing me out!"

This explained why Shinichi had a reputation in Tigris as Rino's pervy manager who was totally obsessed with her—instead of as the hero who defeated Elazonia.

"You get what you deserve." Celes glared at him, eyes saying, "You still take baths with Lady Rino, and you're trying to write this off as slander?"

Shinichi hurriedly switched the topic. "Seems you've done away with the old statue."

He pointed to the place where the former-Goddess Elazonia statue had been enshrined, which was now empty.

"We received too many complaints that it was wrong to have a statue of that evil goddess who hurt our Lady Rino." Juda beamed.

"……" Shinichi looked glum.

It was fitting for the Goddess's religion to be destroyed by a new faith, since they had united Uropeh by gutting local gods and spirits.

I suppose all that's fair must fade, and pride comes before a fall… I could learn a lesson or two.

Juda approached him with a serious expression. “I have a very important question.”

“What?”

“About the new statue of Lady Rino. Would you prefer her in her usual clothes or her idol outfit?”

“…Excuse me?”

“I’ve discussed this with the followers, but we’re split. Some are passionate about keeping her black hair straight. Others are really pushing for the miniskirt and pigtails combo. We just can’t seem to see eye to eye. What if we have to resort to violence?!”

“……”

Even followers of the same religion fought in stupid ways. That was why wars would always exist in this world. Shinichi’s lips formed a mischievous smile.

“What about a sporty ponytail or bookish braids?”

“How could you add such delectably difficult choices?! At this rate, our religion will split into a million sects!”

“May it split into atomic nothingness.”

Shinichi sighed, looking at Juda gritting his teeth.

Celes prodded Shinichi in the back with her finger. “Leave the jokes aside. Why don’t you get back to the main reason for our visit?”

“Oh, right.” Shinichi glanced at the floor to see Celes had already used chalk to prepare the magic circle. “We’re going to be using *Teleport* long-distance. Could you lend some magic?”

“I see. That was the reason for your visit.” Juda snapped out of his inner debate and beckoned the holy warriors, who all joined hands and passed magic to Celes.

“Stay on good terms with the people in the city. See ya,” said Shinichi.

“Of course. By the way, I would like to host a performance by our Lady Rino to unite the faith.”

“And we could use some extra hands—if they’re hot men. ♥ ”

“Take us far away from here, *Teleport*.”

Celes sounded like she was trying to get away from Juda and the holy warrior.

Blinding light enveloped them, and the two of them disappeared from the cathedral.

The Holy City was in the middle of the continent.

A short distance away, two simple but sprawling mansions had been erected on a grassy field. The orphanage run by Holy Mother Cardinal Vermeita.

Even while the adults panicked over Elazonia’s defeat, the children chasing each other in the garden didn’t seem too interested in what was

happening around them. Shinichi and Celes appeared in the middle of the orphanage, in a dim room with curtains pulled shut.

"Where's Vermeita?"

"She's out. I imagine she's working at the Archbasilica," answered Celes, sensing no magic in the vicinity.

"I guess that makes sense. It's still noon. We can go meet her."

"Understood."

Celes cast *Illusion* on Shinichi to make him look like the middle-aged merchant Manju. Who knew what would happen to the Goddess Elazonia's assassin if he paraded around town with his face bare to the public?

With their disguises ready, they opened the door and walked right into the young priestess Francoise.

"Oh, Mr. Manju, I didn't realize you were here."

"We actually just arrived using her magic," said Shinichi in a polite tone.

Celes bowed in a maid-like way.

Francoise let out a sigh of admiration. "I heard from Lady Vermeita that your companion was powerful enough to use *Teleport*."

"My esteemed maid. Can't live without her."

"…" *Thmp.* Celes kicked him in the calf.

It was gentle enough that Shinichi didn't have to turn around to tell she was blushing. He smiled and didn't say anything.

"Is Lady Vermeita in?"

"I'm afraid not. She's currently at the Archbasilica."

"I see. I suppose we should make our way over there."

Shinichi acted like this was new information to ease any suspicions. The two started to leave the orphanage when Francoise frantically called out to stop them.

"Mr. Manju! Um, um…"

"Yes?"

"Are there no new releases from Lady Mimolette?!"

"……"

Et tu, Brute? He stopped himself from saying anything out loud. He had a smile plastered on his face.

"I apologize. I didn't bring it with me today."

"I see…" Her shoulders visibly hunched as she turned to leave.

Francoise suddenly spun back around. "Both the children and I are huge fans of Ms. Mimolette. Could you please tell her I want to be a manga artist like her someday?"

"Of course. I'm sure she'll be overjoyed to hear it."

Francoise beamed at him, practically skipping as she hurried away.

Shinichi watched her with pity before he turned to head to the exit. "Let's get out of here. They're trying to corrupt me."

"And it's your fault."

With Celes pointing out his sins, Shinichi left behind the place that would someday become a school for aspiring manga artists drawing Boys Love.

After they passed through the fields by the orphanage, they entered the Holy City.

Nothing had changed about the quaint city with no walls since their visit in the summer. Nothing, except there were fewer pedestrians and less energy all around.

It wasn't because it was winter. It could only be explained by the fact that the church no longer had control of the continent since the Goddess had been exposed for filth.

"I figured as much." Shinichi chuckled as he looked at an empty home, residents nowhere to be seen.

Without its object of worship and its immortal heroes, the church was sinking like a leaky ship. The Holy Mother was doing everything in her power to patch it up, but even the rats aboard were wise enough to abandon ship.

Shinichi looked up ahead to find a horse-drawn wagon that looked like it was on its way out of the capital. He didn't think much of it, but a stern man in his forties sitting in the driver's seat suddenly called out to him.

"Manju! Is that you?!"

It took Shinichi a moment.

"…Zaim, right? It's been a while." Shinichi bowed his head to hide his surprise.

He was the owner of the jewelry shop that had gotten Shinichi's massive man-made diamond in exchange for intel on the cardinals.

Zaim hopped down from the wagon and stood in front of Shinichi with a nostalgic look on his face. "A long time, indeed. With what happened to the old cardinal, I was worried you'd…"

"Ha-ha. I'm still kicking."

The Elderly Cardinal, Cronklum, became a husk of his former self when ex-Bishop Hube stole his hero symbol. Shinichi remembered he'd played a role in that.

"So have you closed down your shop?"

"Yeah, there aren't any customers who can buy gemstones anymore." Zaim had a pained smile. "After the Elderly Cardinal was stripped of power, the Agreeable Cardinal became bedridden. There's only two of the four cardinals left now."

Rumor had it, the Materialistic Cardinal was about to cut his losses and make for the hills.

“I imagine he’ll disappear with his lovers and children once he’s passed his financial duties off to a successor and sorted his own finances,” continued Zaim.

“Which leaves the Holy Mother in charge of everything. Wow. I wouldn’t have imagined things coming down to this six months ago.”

“Look who’s talking.” Celes’s remark echoed in Shinichi’s mind.

Shinichi was the one who’d orchestrated the whole thing—who’d put the Holy Mother, ally of the demons, in charge of the church to smooth things over for the transition.

He wasn’t surprised by this development. He might have let out peals of triumphant laughter if he could.

Zaim couldn’t read Shinichi’s mind.

“The Holy Mother isn’t really the type to dress up, and the church doesn’t exactly have money to spend on gems. In fact, I’ve had some priests begging me to buy the gems they have on hand.”

“I bet you’re going to buy them cheap and mark them up for maximum profit.”

“Ha-ha-ha!” Zaim laughed. He didn’t try to deny it.

“Amazing… Oh! Right.” Shinichi had an idea. He lowered his voice. “I heard this rumor that Tigris Kingdom has developed some strange new weapon.”

“Really?”

“Yep. It’s apparently a projectile called a ‘matchlock rifle,’ which might revolutionize the battlefield.”

“Match…lock…rifle…”

Zaim couldn’t fathom this new weapon, but there was a gleam in his eye, like a hawk that had spotted its prey.

“Now that the church can’t keep tabs on the citizens, war might break out once the snow melts. That would be the perfect time to sell matchlock rifles…”

“Hmm. I’m intrigued.” Zaim nodded, but he didn’t seem totally convinced. “Why are you telling me this?”

Why would a simple merchant know the secrets of Tigris? Shinichi smirked in his usual way.

“Well, you can’t sell a product if no one knows its value.”

“…You’re one scary man.” Zaim started to feel hot under the collar.

He must have assumed Manju had been tasked with spreading word of Tigris’s new product after he was excommunicated by the church and taken in by the mining country.

It was the opposite, but Shinichi wasn’t about to reveal his secrets.

“I know this has little to do with you, Zaim, since you’re a jeweler, but there’s no harm in you remembering the information.”

“You know, Tigris has mines rich in silver and gold. It’s established in the gemstone trade. I visited when I was still young, and I was thinking I should go again if I get the chance.”

“Oh, well then, this is perfect timing.” Shinichi didn’t say anything else. He decided any further discussion would be pointless and turned around to leave. “Have a nice trip.”

“Thank you. Take care.” Zaim waved and climbed back into the wagon.

Shinichi saw it was moving northwest toward Tigris, and he smiled a devilish grin.

“Ha-ha-ha, he’ll sell whatever makes him money, whether it’s gems or guns. A true merchant, right there.”

“You’re both aggressively dirty.” Celes let out a tired sigh after catching a glimpse of the side of humanity willing to sell even life itself.

Shinichi laughed it off, though. “They can be brought back with *Resurrection*. Let’s just let them line our pockets.”

“I feel sick.”

Celes sighed, imagining all the soldiers who would be killed by guns in the future.

Shinichi chuckled again before heading toward the Archbasilica.

They proceeded to the Archbasilica in the center of the Holy City, told their business to the tired-looking guard at the entrance, and were granted entry after some wait. They walked down hallways—which were considerably emptier than when they’d come in the past to access the library—before they were eventually guided to an office deep within the building.

“Pardon the interruption. You have some visitors.”

“Enter.”

The guard opened the door. Inside they saw a woman who appeared too young and beautiful to be in her midforties. The Holy Mother Vermeita sat on a couch in the office, waiting for Shinichi and Celes with a graceful smile. The desk behind her was stacked high with paperwork. Just looking at it sucked the life out of Shinichi.

“Seems you’re as busy as ever.”

Shinichi waited for the guard to leave, then the Manju disguise melted away. He sat on the couch.

Vermeita nodded, looking worn out. “I’m responsible for the Elderly Cardinal’s administrative duties and the Agreeable Cardinal’s magistrate work. I sleep three hours a night.”

“Ha-ha-ha, you sound like a manga artist who updates weekly.”

Is it worse for your health to use magic to stay awake or pound energy drinks to keep writing?

“Well, I can’t push myself too hard, since I’m not immortal anymore. The fact that I can sleep at all is an improvement from when we were dealing with Hube. Plus, I’ve finally found people to take over these duties.”

“Don’t tell me you abused your new power to employ some hunks.”

Vermeita laughed like he couldn't be further off the mark. "I only considered disposition and qualifications to make my decision. Both of them are women, in fact."

"Huh. I guess this isn't the time to mess around—"

"And both of them are BL shippers."

"I *knew* something was up!"

She had to be plotting to turn the church into her personal haven.

"Aren't the children of the orphanage embarrassed by your antics?" Celes glared at her, but Vermeita had thick skin.

"Everything is fine. In fact, most of the girls are like me. And one boy."

"You're starting to indoctrinate the boys, too?!" Shinichi yelped.

"Unfortunately, he doesn't seem to be interested in other boys, just BL manga."

"A boy who likes BL isn't necessarily gay. Remember that," Shinichi warned.

There was a very delicate balance here. You could find yourself in a fistfight if you recommended a gender-swap fic to someone who liked Girls Love on the basis they were both girls.

"Can we move on to the real topic at hand?" Celes urged, sounding exhausted.

"Oh, right."

Shinichi and Vermeita finally wrapped it up to get down to business.

"Give me a report on the present situation. How much did your population decrease?"

"Not much. It's about ninety percent from its heyday."

"I'm surprised. I thought it would have dropped to half."

Vermeita smiled sadly. "While many have lost their faith, few would abandon their homes and farms to leave the city."

"My bad. I was being dumb." Shinichi realized he'd been insensitive.

They didn't have cars or railroads here, which made travel difficult. Only the wealthy—like Zaim, who could hire guards—and people who could fend for themselves—like mercenaries and monster hunters—could travel through attacks by wolves and bandits. Even if they managed to make it to another city, it would be another struggle to find somewhere to work. Few employers were kind and stupid enough to hire a newcomer, since it was hard to tell if they had criminal tendencies. That left them the "three D" jobs—dirty, demeaning, or dangerous—or selling their bodies.

Plus, it's harder for a worker to quit from injury or to die, since they can be healed or resurrected.

The only exceptions were villages ravaged by monsters. Basically, it was impossible for people, aside from the rich merchants and magic users, to uproot their lives. That's why the Holy City wasn't about to break down immediately, even though the church had fallen.

"We have about as many people returning to the Holy City as there are leaving."

“Priests chased out of their regions?” asked Shinichi, and Vermeita nodded gloomily.

“They all come back looking like the dead, their money stolen and rocks thrown at them for following an evil god.”

“They were lucky they weren’t killed.”

Vermeita glared angrily at Shinichi when he commented like he had nothing to do with this, even though *he* had killed the Goddess knowing the consequences. “There are those who never returned, you know. Well, they were the ones who did the most horrible things.”

“They got what they deserved. And so will the ones who chased out the priests.” Shinichi chuckled, imagining them at their wits’ end after acting in a momentary fit of rage. “No one can heal disease. There won’t be anyone to resurrect them, even if they die. It’s only a matter of time before they come crawling back. Ha-ha-ha!”

“I see your kinks haven’t changed,” Vermeita said sarcastically, though her smile looked like Shinichi’s smirk.

The countries that chased out the church’s priests would likely be on the hunt for unaffiliated magic users or herbalists to fill their healing needs. However, qualified people were hard to find—especially since those who could use magic well enough to use *Resurrection* had been recruited by the church, leaving none among commoners.

“In the end, their only choice if they fear death will be to ask the church for help.”

“It would seem that way.”

Even if the merchants left the Holy City and other countries had chased out their priests, the church wasn’t about to go down just yet.

Celes saw Vermeita smiling and asked something she’d been wondering for a long time. “Lord Shinichi, are you sure you want to leave the church instead of destroying it?”

“Huh?”

“I thought you believed in destroying your enemy so they can never cross you again.”

“You have Satsuma samurai written all over you.”

Shinichi chuckled. Demons, Satsuma-clan samurai, and Spartans had one similarity: They all had a deep appreciation for battle.

“I’m not proposing to kill them all—since it would upset Lady Rino—but there’s no reason to leave the organization of the church intact,” Celes pointed out.

They had managed to create a cease-fire by baiting the Holy Mother with manga instead of trying to kill the immortal heroes in vain. With their object of worship and heroes now gone, the church could be toppled with one strong push. Trust was at an all-time low, and most of the continent treated the church as an enemy. If there was a good time to attack, it was now.

“If you want healers and magic users who can cast *Resurrection*, you could easily train them. There is no real reason to be stuck with the church, is there?” Celes pressed.

Shinichi was impressed a meathead had managed to come up with this sound argument.

“Hmm, Celes, you’ve really grown.”

“But my bra size hasn’t changed?”

“I wasn’t talking about your chest!” Shinichi shrieked.

Celes closed her eyes. “I’ve been by your side, listening to you day in, day out. I can gather as much.”

“Uh, oh…”

Celes had tried to remain cool and collected, but her tanned face started to flush. Shinichi’s heart started to race.

He heard the entertained snicker slip from Vermeita’s lips.

Shinichi cleared his throat. “*Ahem…* I understand what you’re trying to say, Celes. You’re concerned that followers still believe in Elazonia, right?”

“Yes. In the one-in-a-million chance she’s resurrected, we’d be in big trouble.”

Elazonia was a ghost collecting magic from the prayers of her followers. Even though they had split her in half with the dragon sword, she could be revived if followers remained.

Shinichi took this very seriously.

“We’ve destroyed the ghost—Elazonia, formerly known as Elen—who despised demons and dragons. We’ve wiped out her memories, which means there’s no coming back.”

As with the cremated body of the little girl on Earth, it wasn’t possible to resurrect someone who had totally ceased to exist, even with *Resurrection* magic.

I’m a little worried she’s made tools to create her clone and kept a backup of her memories…

They hadn’t discovered anything of the sort in her underground laboratory, and two months had passed with no signs of her. It was safe to say Elazonia had perished, but she might be able to make a doppelgänger, like with the girl who dreamt of being an explorer.

“A spell changes reality to meet your imagination… If believers wished for the Goddess Elazonia to exist, it might be possible for them to create her.”

“Yes—with tens of thousands of followers and a skilled magic user like Lady Sanctina,” said Celes, who was a master of countless spells and only less powerful than the Demon King.

Shinichi trusted Sanctina wouldn’t do this, which is why he smiled to show Celes she didn’t have to worry. “Anyone trying to gather such a big crowd would stick out, and they’d be hard pressed to find someone as strong as that pervert. Re-creating the Goddess Elazonia is virtually impossible.”

“They’ll have to try over my dead body,” said Vermeita, backing Shinichi.

It would be impossible to assemble that many believers outside of the Holy City, and the one who controlled the city, the Holy Mother, had no desire to see Elazonia ever again.

“Even if she was brought back by the followers, it would be ‘their ideal version of the Goddess Elazonia.’ It would be different from the Elazonia we knew.”

It wouldn’t be an evil god scheming to annihilate the demons and dragons. It could be great if the followers managed to create a merciful entity worthy of being called a true goddess.

“As long as we’re free from that nasty woman, the Demon King and I will never be defeated again,” Shinichi declared.

“I see. My concerns were unfounded.” Celes was convinced by his confidence.

“I know it would be a hassle if there was a resurgence of anti-demon followers, even without the Goddess’s revival. But destroying the church comes with more cons than pros.”

“Like?”

“Like the securing of doctors—healers and magic users. I know you want us to make a training facility, but that’s *so* bothersome.”

“You’re so lazy.”

“A lazy person will find the easiest solution. There’s not much to be gained from destroying the existing training facility—the church—and building another one from scratch,” replied Shinichi without missing a beat. “I mean, if we did run a healing organization on the same scale as the church, Rino would end up at the helm, which means she’d be as busy as the Holy Mother over there.”

“Understood. We’ll keep the church running, even if it kills you,” Celes told Vermeita. She tended to go easy on Rino.

“Ignoring my struggles, huh?” Vermeita chuckled sarcastically.

“And it’s better for there to be a common enemy between the demons and humans to improve their relations,” said Shinichi.

Vermeita nodded sadly. “That’s the best way to band enemies together. All the hostility between them is redirected at the church.”

“Which is why demons and humans can get along and start working together.”

“Lady Rino would cry if she heard you…” Celes sighed at this morally questionable conversation.

That said, not everyone in the world was a perfect angel like Rino. If they couldn’t even use innate human evil to their advantage, they would never achieve peace.

“That’s why I want the church to keep at it as long as possible…” Shinichi shifted on the couch.

Up until now, they had discussed the current situation with the church. He was now ready to address his true reason for their visit.

“I’ll be direct. Are there any countries on the brink of war now that they’re freed from the church?”

“Yes. Particularly in the south,” Vermeita answered immediately.

Though her influence had decreased significantly, Vermeita still could gather intel in the Archbasilica from followers in the different regions.

“The west is fairly stable with the Demon King’s presence, and the church remains strong in the central region. Snow is heavy in the north, meaning it’ll be quiet until it melts.”

“And the east?” asked Shinichi.

Vermeita paled slightly. “I’ve heard bizarre stories of female elves emerging from Cemetarium Forest, trying to kidnap the hottest guys in nearby villages. Apparently, fights are breaking out between them and human women, but I don’t think it’s a sign of war.”

“*That’s* what the long-eared freaks have been up to?” said Celes in frustration.

Shinichi understood where they were coming from. “They don’t have to kiss up to the limited elven men anymore now that they know they were originally human. Since they’ve repressed their desires for so long, they’ve become mega-flirts.”

It had taken some time for the haughty elves to warm up to the truth, but they were desperate to prevent their own extinction from inbreeding. The elven men with harems started to begrudge Shinichi’s crew for the women’s changed behavior, but that must have been the final straw, because the elven women ended up decking the men. The three most annoying of the elven women kept pestering Shinichi, but none of that was important.

“Right. That leaves the south, which might be dangerous,” said Shinichi.

“Yes. The coastal countries with extensive trade routes across the ocean are some of the most powerful on the continent. The smaller nations have always been against the church, itching to fight for their independence.”

Without the church’s hold on them, they were raring to fight to achieve their goals, which would blow up into all-out war.

Celes was hung up on something in Vermeita’s explanation. “When you say ‘ocean,’ do you mean that large, salty lake?”

“Oh. I guess demons aren’t familiar with that concept,” noted Shinichi.

Celes nodded. “I’ve only heard stories from Her Highness.”

There weren’t any briny oceans in the underground world—dug by the Black Dragon, where the Blue Dragon served as the “sun.” There were some rare exceptions, like bodies of salt water from dissolved rock salt.

Plus, Shinichi’s team had only been to landlocked countries—Tigris, the Holy City, Cemetarium Forest, and the restricted zone. They’d never once gone to the ocean.

“Let’s take a dip in the sea when it gets warm. I’d love to see you in a swimsuit, Celes.”

“You’re thinking something lewd, aren’t you?”

“Don’t worry! I’ll get a white slingshot bikini for you!”

“Your nose is bleeding, you perv.” Celes latched her claw on his face, but he was lost in his fantasies.

Vermeita smiled at the two before returning to the topic at hand. “Do you intend to step in once you see signs of potential war?”

“We don’t plan any direct interference.” Shinichi sensed some wariness beneath her smile. “We’ll just sell them guns—the newest weapon from Tigris.”

Shinichi recounted his conversation with Sieg. She nodded in satisfaction.

“I see. You want us to take advantage of the fact that these guns will result in major casualties.”

“Exactly.” The corners of his mouth curled up, happy that she was quick to catch on.

It would be impossible for any organization—other than the church—to handle the thousands of resurrections needed as a result of guns. After these southern countries waged war, they’d come crawling and begging for their help even though they had been the ones to chase them out.

“They’re rich from trade, right? We’ll steal every last coin from their coffers so they can’t even think about waging another war anytime soon.”

“And when they come to appreciate the value of resurrection magic, they’ll stop resisting the church,” finished Vermeita, smiling devilishly at Shinichi.

Celes already seemed exhausted. “What will you do if the southern countries refuse the church’s support?”

“Then we rile up the families of the dead soldiers until they can apply enough pressure to make their leaders change their minds.”

If they could get the citizens wound up—This country is trying to abandon your fathers, your husbands, your friends, the brave soldiers who lost their lives in the war!—they might even riot. The rulers would have no choice but to welcome the church back.

“It would go even better if the king or nobles were killed in the chaos of war.”

“Didn’t you just say you didn’t intend to get involved?”

“Yeah, I meant *I* wouldn’t do anything.” Shinichi looked at Vermeita.

The Holy Mother beamed at him. “It would be so unfortunate if a random bullet pierced the king’s heart.”

“You planning on using *Homing Arrow*?”

“Oh, I was thinking of casting *Invisibility* to get a close shot, but your idea is better.”

“A stealth sniper? Ha-ha-ha. You’re nasty.”

“Hee-hee-hee. Not as much as you.”

“…You’re both priests of the evil god.” Celes was too tired to sigh as Shinichi and Vermeita excitedly chatted about assassination.

Shinichi's face turned serious again. "This is only if the southern countries wage war. We won't do anything if they stay in their lanes. Well, other than selling guns."

"How is that different from inciting war?"

"Like I told the captain earlier, they're going to fight regardless of whether or not they have guns."

It would increase the number of casualties, which would cause them to incur fees to the church, but that wasn't any of Shinichi's business.

Vermeita agreed. "I imagine they'll wage war sooner or later, even without any action on our part."

Up until now, there had been small skirmishes resulting from territorial disputes. The church used to step in with their immortal heroes when it got to the point of a country getting annihilated, but now, there was no one pulling the reins. It wasn't just the southern countries, either. Soon, they would see people spurred to action—It was human nature. There was nothing they could do about it.

"All we can do is resurrect as many people as possible," said Vermeita.

"And we want them to experience war so that they don't want to do it again," added Shinichi.

Humans remembered pain better than any other emotion. Without experiencing it directly or seeing someone close go through it, they found it difficult to understand the horrors of war. Fortunately, these people could be resurrected and learn from their mistakes.

"So we'll sell them loads of guns and let them drop like flies!" Shinichi declared, evil smile on his face.

"I understand the logic, but this is appalling." Celes slumped over dejectedly.

After they discussed BL manga and steps to take if war broke out, Shinichi and Celes left the Archbasilica.

Celes used the magic conductor, which Shinichi was carrying in his bag, to cast a *Teleport* spell. They were whisked from the Holy City to a room in the Demon King's castle.

"Thanks as always, Celes." Shinichi bowed.

"You're quite welcome."

Celes bowed back. They were about to go their separate ways, since they were done with their work for the day.

"You rotten scoundrel!"

Someone kicked the door open, revealing three unwelcome houseguests.

"Where have you been? Don't tell me you've forgotten your promise!" screeched a beautiful young elf with pale skin and golden hair—Clarissa.

Shinichi had promised to introduce the women to hunky demon guys if they helped defeat Elazonia. Since then, they'd abandoned their village and come to mooch off the castle.

"It's already been two months!"

"That's right. Hot guys. Now."

Clarissa's two friends grumbled behind her.

Shinichi sighed. "Didn't I say we're in the middle of finding the right ones?"

He had no intention of breaking his promise. He'd asked Ribido the succubus to go into the demon world and find some eligible bachelors. But it wasn't going too well.

"Would you mind telling me your requirements one more time?" asked Shinichi.

"Someone hot, strong, and sadistic enough to torture me, obviously!"

"A man who's humble, kind, and totally devoted to me. Also, gorgeous."

"Someone young and tall and good at cooking and smoking hot!"

"This is absurd," Celes grumbled, staring at the three elves rattling off their impossible standards.

This was the reason they'd had trouble finding good candidates after two months.

It's hard enough finding guys that meet their beauty standards.

The Demon King ruled over a major metropolis with a mountain fortress in the center—population nearing seventy thousand people. That included all kinds of demons, but the majority were orcs, centaurs, and others with strong beast features, which weren't suited to the elves' tastes.

Even those close to humans—like giants and dvergr—were scratched off the list for being "stupid and violent" or "hairy and fat." The only two races that passed the test were dark elves and incubi, which meant their candidate pool was down to less than 10 percent of the population.

There was another problem.

"Do you really think there are many *unmarried* guys that meet your criteria?"

"Grrr…"

Shinichi's question shut Clarissa up real quick.

Demon races had varying life spans, though they were generally considered adults between fifteen and twenty-five.

Plus, the demons loved to fight over every little detail, making them basically the jocks of the world.

As Regina had once said, "Life is short, make babies, girl." She wasn't joking. They could die at any time, as the world was their slaughterhouse. In fact, most of the population married as soon as they were adults and immediately had children.

Needless to say, if there was a man perfect enough to meet Clarissa's requirements, the women of the demon world wouldn't have let him slip away.

“I could find a married man, like, now. But I don’t think you want that.”

“Obviously!” Clarissa snapped.

Unlike human society, there were no restrictions on polygamous marriages for elves and demons. But because they’d experienced the horrors of harems in their home village, this was a line they refused to cross.

“That’s why it’s taking us forever. You can either wait longer or lower your standards,” said Shinichi.

“I’ve already waited this long… Why shouldn’t I hang on for my Prince Charming…? But… I don’t want to marry ‘late,’ either…!”

“Yeah, Clarissa. It would suck if we got old all alone because we were too hung up on the details.”

“Unwanted old spinsters are just pathetic.”

“Silence,” barked Shinichi, sweat beading on his brow, as the maid in her twenties started to glare at the teen elves.

Just then, Shinichi heard a familiar voice in his mind.

“Hi, hi, Shinichi, can you hear me?”

“Ribido? Did you find some eligible bachelors?”

“Yeaaaah, but about that…”

Perfect timing! Shinichi was ecstatic, but Ribido started to list off potential problems. He thought them over for a moment before nodding.

“Okay. We’ll see if this works out.”

“Are you suuuure?”

“Clarissa’s gang are forcing us to pick up the pace. They can take responsibility for what happens.”

“All righty. See you soon!”

Once Shinichi wrapped up his telepathic conversation with Ribido, he looked at the three elves staring at him with bated breath.

His lips spread into a satisfied grin. “Great news! We’ve finally had some luck in our search.”

“Yes! They’re smoking hot, right?”

“Uh-huh. Succubus approved.”

“I’m starting to see you in a new light, dirty human!”

“Our time has finally come!”

“It’s been so long…”

Clarissa and her two elf friends hugged one another, crying tears of joy.

Shinichi watched them with his usual smirk.

“*What are you plotting this time?*” Celes asked telepathically, noticing his smile.

“Ever heard of ‘chicks before pricks’? We’re putting that theory to test.”

“…I see.”

Celes had a vague idea what he was planning. Gazing on the ecstatic elves with pity, she left to start preparing for the singles mixer.

The tables and couches were set up in a small room for an intimate feel. On the table were food and drinks, giving the room the same vibe as a private karaoke room. The three elves perched on the sofa, facing Shinichi and Celes, knees knocking together from nerves.

“I-i-i-it’s gonna be okay,” Clarissa assured herself. “They won’t grant me the privilege of spitting in my face as soon as they enter the doors…right?”

“Relax. The only problem is your sanity,” said Shinichi.

“Thank goodness…”

“Clarissa, he’s making fun of you.”

Clarissa must not have been feeling herself if she couldn’t even come up with a rude clapback. After a short wait, the door to the room swung open for Ribido.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! Come on in,” she urged.

“Thanks for the invite!”

A young dark elf with short hair stepped into the room.

Around fifteen, he looked like a real jock—tan, muscular; he had a smile on his face.

“““Wow!”””

The elf girls’ faces lit up upon seeing this perfect specimen, but their excitement was short-lived, lasting all of five seconds.

“All righty, I’ll leave you to handle the rest!” Ribido waltzed out of the room, leaving behind the single boy.

“Uh… What about the rest?” asked Clarissa in shock.

“There aren’t any more,” said Shinichi.

“Whaaaa—?!” Clarissa gasped hysterically.

“Suck it up. We could only find one,”

he explained. “Like I said, there aren’t many unmarried hot demons. I wanted to find three for you, but I was worried he’d get snatched up by another woman while we continued our hunt.”

Shinichi maintained he had no choice.

The elves were taken aback for a moment, but then they looked at one another.

“““—!”””

They glared at one another as if they weren’t lifelong friends. There were three of them and only one guy. Two of them would leave as losers today.

“Best friends forever?”

“Obviously, Clarissa.”

“Duh. Ha-ha-ha.”

The three shook hands, huge smiles on their faces—but their eyes looked dead inside.

Shinichi silently chuckled at the bloodhounds before him.

Hee-hee-hee! Fight! Fight! Fight! Shinichi chanted.

“The unholy priest has outdone himself once again.” Celes sent him a telepathic message dripping with sarcasm.

“The fact that we could only find him was total coincidence. But you have to remember: Love is a battlefield. Sometimes, you need to be cutthroat enough to kick aside your friends or sisters if it means winning.”

“Interesting. By the way, does the ‘one man and three women’ dynamic ring any bells?”

“All right!” Shinichi blurted out. “Maybe we should introduce ourselves!”

He skirted the issue by taking on the role of event organizer.

The elves laid their hostility aside for a moment with fake smiles and introduced themselves, starting with the gold-haired leader and author of masochistic novels.

“I’m Clarissa. My kink is being spanked.”

“Hey!”

“Don’t worry! I’m just talking about my fantasies—not from experience!”

“That’s even cringier!”

Clarissa ignored Shinichi, puffing her small chest out proudly.

Up next was the tallest and oldest of the three, who had pink hair.

“I’m Rosier. I like to cook. I particularly enjoy baking cakes and macarons.”

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. A timeworn truism!” Shinichi commented.

“…But every cake I’ve given a man has been smashed on the ground, never to be eaten…” Rosier began to recount her traumatic experiences.

“Let’s keep it light!” Shinichi winced as the light went out of her eyes.

The smallest elf who talked like a guy stood up, trying to lift the vibe.

“Maren,” said the blue-haired elf. “My hobby is hunting for dinner in the forest.”

“Demons are self-sufficient, so I imagine that makes a good impression,” Shinichi interjected.

“…If I went out to hunt, I wouldn’t get sexually harassed by that dirty old man.”

“Let’s keep it light!” Shinichi blurted out again, shaking her by the shoulders as her eyes rolled back. “Forget the men from your village. The women decked the shit out of them, remember?”

“You’re right. That dirty old man is no longer with us.” Maren looked up at the heavens, smiling gently.

“I’m preeeetty sure he’s still alive,” retorted Rosier with a crooked smile.

…Said the one who’d drowned the cake-disposing idiot in mud and resurrected him. Thrice.

The dark elf boy listened to their introductions in silent amazement.

Celes spoke to him gently. “If you would like to run, now is your chance.”

“Oh, I was just surprised! I like strong girls!” he declared with a smile. “My name is Darc. My hobbies include weight lifting, training, and practice.”

“A perfect example of a meathead,” said Shinichi.

“I’m totally devoted to training because my dream is to become as powerful as the Blue Demon King, but my parents have been on my case lately about getting married. So here I am.”

“You’re taking things *too* lightly!”

Darc’s positive attitude was the exact opposite of the girls’.

Beside Shinichi, Rosier and Maren nodded to express their agreement.

“I hear you. Parents can be so insensitive, pressuring us to get married and have kids.”

“It’s, like, I know *they* didn’t like it when their parents said the same thing to them!”

“If I had a partner in mind, it wouldn’t be so dang hard!”

“I would have gladly given them grandchildren, if it wasn’t with someone old enough to be my grandpa!”

“Reel it in,” Shinichi warned, patting their shoulders as they started to get worked up. “I understand where you’re coming from, but you should be mindful that you’re hurting some feelings with this conversation.”

“…Both my parents gave up on me getting married anyway,” sulked Clarissa.

“…I’m old leftovers anyway. It’s like the people around me are walking on eggshells and stopped telling me to settle down,” Celes grumbled.

They sat glumly in the corner, hugging their knees to their chests.

Darc lowered his head apologetically. “I’m sorry. I always say stupid things…”

“Bro…” Shinichi looked serious as he patted Darc’s back, moved by his kindness. “Go back to the demon world. It’d be a shame if you were sacrificed to these perverts.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” shouted Clarissa, jumping to her feet, sensitive to insults.

Her two friends weren’t about to let that go, either.

“The only pervert here is Clarissa!”

“We don’t write cringey romance novels!”

“Take it easy. This is your friend,” said Shinichi as Clarissa went back to huddling in the corner.

It was starting to get annoying, so he picked her up by the scruff of her neck and dragged her to the couch. After that, he gave Celes one of the candies he kept on hand to improve her mood and finally got the conversation back on track.

“I would normally suggest playing some games or something for a more intimate vibe, but I propose we skip that.”

Even if they wanted to do karaoke or bowl for this singles mixer, they didn’t have the right equipment for it. They could do truth or dare, but it would become a train wreck if the masochistic pervert ended up with a dare.

It didn’t seem like the dark elf boy was interested in beating around the bush.

“Darc, do you intend on getting married?” asked Shinichi.

“Yes. Even if my parents weren’t pressuring me, I’d want to get married to continue my bloodline!”

“Simple enough.”

Any living organism got stronger to live longer and made children to pass down their genes. Humans might even be jealous of Darc, who was true to his instincts instead of other worldly ties.

“And who out of these three would you want to marry?”

“““—Ngh!”””

The elves stiffened like they’d been hit by a bolt of lightning.

Darc didn’t seem nervous, chuckling. “Whoever’s the strongest!”

“I *knew* you were going to be the worst,” Shinichi said.

It was the obvious answer for a demon, but he clearly didn’t understand a maiden’s heart. Their shoulders slumped in disappointment.

“The strongest, huh…? I’d punch him if he weren’t so good-looking.”

“He’s eons better than the imbecile who wanted us to wait on him hand and foot.”

“And he’s totally different from that dirty old man. He seems young and sincere.”

“Do you not think your standards are too low?” asked Celes, gazing pityingly at Rosier and Maren.

That said, Darc was a good catch compared with the men of their village.

“He might seem cold and unfamiliar with romance,” said Shinichi, “but love needs time to grow. He might not have money or status, but that’s only a problem in human society.”

The elves controlled enough magic to create a golem to work the fields and live a carefree life. It was easy to sense Darc was good at magic from his years of training.

“I’m going to ask just to be sure. Do any of you have any intentions of turning him down?” asked Shinichi.

“No. He doesn’t seem all that sadistic, though,” replied Clarissa, stepping forward.

Rosier and Maren looked disappointed in themselves but remained silent. They knew who was the strongest among the three of them without fighting.

Darc flashed a toothy grin as he looked happily at the three.

“Sorry to say, but I’ll have to turn you down if you’re weak.”

Show me what you got! He placed his right elbow on the table.

Clarissa gulped, then strongly gripped his hand. “I’ll show you what the light elves are capable of!”

Shinichi placed his palm on their joined hands.

“Are you both ready? Ready, set…go!”

““Hah!””

Their muscles strained as soon as Shinichi signaled the start. The table began to creak, but the two remained in balance in the center, arms quivering.

“Not bad.”

“Neither are you.”

Sweat trickled down both their foreheads as they complimented each other.

It was hard to imagine Clarissa, a slender woman, standing a chance against Darc, a heavier man. But she was a magic user. She was casting *Physical Enchantment* to boost her muscles.

“They’re evenly matched right now, but…” Shinichi trailed off as Clarissa’s arm was slowly pushed back.

“Ack…”

“I can’t lose here!” Darc’s arm pressed down.

He intended to catch up with the Blue Demon King, and one day, even surpass him.

Clarissa was trying desperately to keep her hand from touching the table.

“I’m the one who can’t lose—!” She gritted her teeth.

Memories of heartless taunts from her childhood peers flashed in her mind. How they’d mocked her for stopping her bloodline! How they’d accused her of being childless for life!

The only thing she had going for her was driving away the heroes and protecting the village with her power.

That's why—

"I can't lose until a sadistic dreamboat takes my virginityyyy—!"

"Phrasing!" Shinichi shrieked.

"Overdrive!"

Her entire body was encircled in blinding light. With blood spurting from her arm, she pushed back Darc's arm and slammed it to the table. The impact split the surface in half, sending the dark elf to the ground, jaw slack from shock.

Shinichi took the light elf's blood-soaked arm and raised it high. "The winner is…Clarissa!"

"Congrats, Clarissa!"

"I knew you could do it!"

Rosier and Maren cried out in joy, hugging Clarissa, who grinned in silence. The loser slowly stood in front of her and smiled gently.

"Thank you. Good game."

"No, thank *you*. You're not half bad."

Darc extended a hand, and Clarissa gripped it back. They smiled at each other, then Darc quietly turned away.

"I guess there are many powerful people in this world other than the Demon King… I'm gonna start training from scratch. See ya!"

"Good luck." Shinichi waved as the muscular man rushed out the door.

The light elves waved to him from behind.

"And do you remember why we're here today?"

""…Ack!""

Their faces, flushed from victory, turned pale. After two whole months of searching, Ribido had finally tracked down one strong, sincere, single, and smoking-hot guy, and they'd let him get away without a fight.

"We can clean up tomorrow. Let's break for today," Shinichi suggested.

"Understood," replied Celes as the two left the room, leaving Clarissa and her friends frozen in shock.

As soon as the door closed, the girls exploded on one another.

"Clarissa! What have you done?!"

"We won't ever find a catch as good as him!"

"H-h-h-he said he didn't like weak girls! I had to try!"

"You tried too hard! Boys are sensitive creatures! You need to lose on purpose to make them feel stronger!"

"This is all because you have no experience…"

"Shut up! You're both virgins with no dating experience—other than kissing up to an imbecile and getting harassed by a dirty grandpa!"

"…Clarissa, did I just hear you correctly?"

"…I haven't been this mad in a long time."

"You wanna go? Come at me!"

Shinichi grinned to himself when he heard magic blasted and insults barked. “There’s no way to eliminate fighting from this world as long as humans and resources are limited…”

“Says the man who put kindling in the fire.”

Shinichi responded with a tiny yawn as they walked down the hallway of the Demon King’s castle.

“*Huff…* What a busy day.”

Shinichi dived into his bed on returning to his room.

“Good job,” Celes commended him, standing next to the wall like she was waiting for her next order.

Their work was done, and she could retire to her own room, but Shinichi thought it might be rude to chase her off.

He sat up. “Celes, have you never thought about marriage?”

“Black Dragon who rules below the surface—” Celes started to chant.

“Declining to answer, huh?!” Shinichi rushed to explain himself. “I just thought someone must have proposed to you, since you’re so strong among the demons.”

“Well, I cannot say there have been none…”

Celes must have been upset that he didn’t seem particularly jealous, and she pouted.

“The topic was broached a few times…around five years after Lady Regina met His Majesty during our travels and bore Rino.”

Apparently, there had been times when dark elves proposed at first sight and Ribido and Regina introduced her to eligible bachelors. None of them, it seemed, went well.

“But there was never anyone stronger than me.”

“Ah…” That made sense to Shinichi.

Celes was the sole pupil of the Blue Princess of War, who was matched in power with the almighty Blue Demon King. For the past ten years, the only man to rival her magic was her master, the Demon King himself.

“Just because I’m a demon doesn’t mean I’ll marry on strength alone. In fact, many marry for love. I’ve simply never met anyone who made me feel that way.”

If Ribido was here, she’d blame Celes for never putting herself out there. In reality, Celes had been too busy and having too much fun caring for Rino, which was why she never settled down.

It’s like when people miss their chance to get married because of doting over their new pet, thought Shinichi.

As if reading his mind, Celes glared at him, and Shinichi quickly looked away.

“You’re so…” Celes sighed in frustration before taking a big breath like she was preparing for something. “You know, I have finally found what I was looking for.”

“And what’s that?”

“Someone stronger than me.”

She stared at him. Her golden eyes made him think of the moon.

There was the Goddess Elazonia, who’d managed to pull a fast one on the Demon King, and the Dirty Advisor, who went above her and succeeded in his plot to destroy her.

“No, I—”

“The ability to get others to cooperate is a type of power,” Celes quietly admitted as Shinichi tried to piece together a random excuse.

When it came to a fight to the death, nothing was off the table—not even underhanded tricks. Judging by demon standards, Shinichi was the strongest person Celes had ever met.

“Your strength of mind changed the world—and me. It’s something neither His Majesty nor My Lady have.”

“You won’t get anything from sucking up to me, except maybe some candy.”

Shinichi blushed and tried to veer the conversation offtrack, but she wouldn’t drop the topic or her gaze.

“Will you continue to let me be by your side as I watch your strength transform the world?”

“……”

Celes implored him with dewy eyes.

He looked back at her for a moment in silence before flashing his usual smile. “I’m just a puny human who can’t even *Teleport*. You think I’ll ever part with my overpowered, pervy maid?”

“Pervy? How dare you.”

“Gaaaaaah—!” He screamed out in pain.

Celes clamped a claw on Shinichi’s skull, squeezing so hard he thought his head might crack.

“You’re so…” Celes sighed and removed her hand from his face.

Just as she reached the door, ready to leave, she spun around, lifting the hem of her skirt and curtsying with a gentle smile.

“From this day forward, till death do us part, I’ll be in your care, Master.”

“Uh… What is that supp—” Shinichi started, but Celes shut the door behind her.

He heard her walking away. Now alone, he pressed his hands to his burning cheeks and rolled back to lie on the bed.

“That’s so unfair…”

He thought he heard a voice—*“Says you”*—and continued to toss and turn in bed.

School Hours

A familiar face appeared in the audience chamber for Boar Kingdom's King Tortoise IV.

"It has been a while, Mr. Manju."

"Indeed, Your Majesty."

The middle-aged merchant, accompanied by his beautiful blue-haired maid, bowed his head.

Tortoise IV thought back to their first encounter more than half a year ago. It had been around the time when the demons had appeared in Dog Valley, Bishop Hube had twisted his arm to launch an attack against them, and the Demon King had annihilated six thousand of his soldiers. For a long time, the Kingdom had been consumed by fear and chaos.

Then this merchant came, suggesting they trade with the demons. At the time, it had seemed ludicrous, but now the king could see Manju had been ahead of the game. King Tortoise IV was wary and excited about his latest visit, but he remained calm and collected.

"I've heard rumors of you purchasing food from villages near Dog Valley and selling it to the demons. Is this true?" asked the King.

"Yes."

The ministers and knights started to murmur among themselves. It wasn't in disbelief, but more along the lines of having their assumptions proven right.

Rumor had already reached Boar Kingdom that Tigris had formed relations with the demons, developing a strange new substance called "gunpowder." If that was true, that meant the demons weren't the evil beings of legend but entities capable of negotiating with humans. Manju's statement was just more proof of that.

It was the church that decided demons were enemies to humankind in the first place.

As it turned out, the object of their worship was a fiend. The priests desperately tried to convince everyone that this evilness in Elazonia was totally divorced from her, but no one was buying their drivel. In fact, the legends portraying demons as evil were simply slanderous stories created by the church.

Not that we can totally lower our guard, thought the King.

Even if demons weren't evil, they were still strong enough to destroy Elazonia. He couldn't just put his faith in entities with enough power to destroy Boar Kingdom in half a day.

While Tortoise IV gathered himself, Manju was steering the conversation forward.

"What business have you today?" asked the King.

"I've been entrusted with a letter directly from the Blue Demon King Ludabite himself."

“What?!” Tortoise IV reacted in shock along with every other person in the audience chamber.

Even when Boar Kingdom had done the most—sending in their troops and heroes—the demons had not acted (on the surface) other than in self-defense. This was the first time they’d made a move.

The room was tense as a minister accepted Manju’s scroll and passed it to King Tortoise IV.

“For your inspection, Your Majesty.”

“…Hmm.” King Tortoise IV broke the wax seal with stiff hands and unrolled the parchment. Inside was a simple request written in large letters.

“‘In an effort to improve relations between humans and demons, I wish to invite ambassadors to our castle…’ What is the meaning of this?”

“Exactly as it says,” Manju assured him. “The Demon King is hoping to build friendly relations not just with Tigris but with Boar Kingdom as well. I understand it might be difficult to trust the demons immediately.”

“I regret to inform you that is true.”

“That is why he is inviting ambassadors of Boar Kingdom to live in his castle with the demons for two months. It will help facilitate a deeper understanding between the two parties, and then you may decide whether it is worth your time and effort moving forward.”

“Hmm…” King Tortoise IV stroked his chin in thought.

He was aware that the entirety of Boar Kingdom didn’t stand a chance against the Demon King. Though they couldn’t do anything to prevent the demons from overtaking the country, the demons wanted to form a friendship with the humans on equal footing. There wasn’t a single reason why they should decline that offer.

But for people to go to the Demon King’s lair…, he thought.

In his mind flashed the image of three thousand soldiers struck down in a single instant by a rain of magic arrows. He hesitated, fear lingering in his heart.

“Of course,” Manju added with a big smile, “it would be boring for the ambassadors to do nothing in the Demon King’s castle. That was why they’ll be offered an opportunity to learn from the demons.”

“Learn what?”

“Things like…how to make gunpowder.”

“What?!” King Tortoise IV jumped up from his throne, and the ministers started to buzz. “Gunpowder is that powdery substance spreading across Tigris—the one that erupts in fire!”

“Yes. The demons offered it to the Kingdom of Tigris as a sign of friendship.”

“I-interesting…” The King gulped.

He wasn’t entirely sure of gunpowder’s value, but he did understand that the demons knew something that could be incredible and very useful. If they could get even a small portion of it, it would be a blessing to Boar Kingdom.

I don't imagine many would happily spend time with the demons even if the rewards were great…

Manju saw the King's uncertain state and cracked a little joke.

"I hope you are not concerned the demons will eat the ambassadors or anything."

"Of course not…"

"Have no fear. If demons ate humans, I would have been in their stomach long ago."

"A demon would get food poisoning if they ate someone as rotten as you," snapped the maid, and the audience burst into laughter.

Manju shrugged. "Anyway, I understand you might be uncomfortable sending your people to stay with the demons."

As if on cue, a single girl walked through the doors, head held high. Her red hair brushed against her shoulders. Every single person in the room knew her.

"Arian the Red Hero?!"

"It's been a long time, Your Majesty." Arian knelt politely in front of King Tortoise IV, who appeared shocked but happy. "I apologize for suddenly disappearing from Boar Kingdom and, more importantly, for hiding my true identity as a half dragon. I hope you can forgive me."

"No need to apologize. You defeated evil and saved this world. No one could find fault with you!" cried the aging knight captain.

He had been standing by his king's side in silence until that moment. His face turned red once he realized he'd stepped out of line, and he hurriedly bowed his head in apology, but King Tortoise IV smiled and let it slide.

"Have no fear. I feel the same. Arian, it does not matter who you are. There is not a single person in this country who hates you with all you have accomplished."

"…Thank you, Your Majesty, Captain." Arian looked down for a moment like she was holding back tears but then looked up with a bright smile.

Manju watched the exchange and looked as happy as Arian before urging her to tell them the real reason for her visit.

"I worked with the demons to defeat Elazonia, and I'm now living at the Demon King's castle."

"I thought that might be the case when I saw the battle displayed in the sky…" said the king.

"Please have no fear," declared Arian, like she was trying to cut through the disappointment that a hero had become friends with the enemy. "If the demons hurt any innocent people, including the ambassadors, I will execute them. Even if it is the Blue Demon King himself."

"What?!" King Tortoise IV stood from his throne again for the nth time today.

Arian drew her sword from its scabbard at her waist and held it aloft for everyone to see. "I swear on the dragon sword given to me by my father."

"……" The king was at a loss for words, gazing up at her sword.

Her dragon power had awakened. If she was to wield the blade that had cut Elazonia in two, she would be able to defeat anyone, even the dreadful king of demons himself.

Of course, this whole thing was an act. The Demon King and Arian were coconspirators. There was no real proof that they wouldn't attack the Boar Kingdom. Even so, King Tortoise IV believed her. Her noble eyes hadn't changed from their first meeting.

"Arian, I will leave the lives of the ambassadors in your hands," he said.

"Thank you for trusting me!" She stood briskly, like a proud hero, showered with applause from the surrounding people.

Once the three—Manju, the maid, and Arian—had left, the King unfurled the scroll again and blinked at it in confusion.

"About this condition… 'Ambassadors must be under the age of twelve and may include girls.' What is that about?"

"Maybe because older people are stuck in their ways, making their prejudices toward the demons too ingrained? Or maybe they believe the youth would be better for learning because they pick up things more quickly," offered a minister.

King Tortoise IV nodded as if he agreed that must be the reason. He now had a new problem: How would they select the children who would act as ambassadors?

About three weeks before Shinichi went to Boar Kingdom, Rino had been practicing magic in front of the castle, an audience around her.

"Ummm… Ball of fire—shoot down my enemies, *Fireball*!"

A baseball-sized sphere materialized from Rino's palm when she recited the unfamiliar incantation. It hit the snowman sixty feet away from her, resulting in a small explosion.

"Hmm, fantastic!" hooted the Demon King, clapping ecstatically.

"Amazing job, Lady Rino!" cooed Sanctina.

"You know, it sounds sarcastic when you go overboard." Shinichi looked unimpressed.

Half of the snowman's torso had been blown away by Rino's fireball, but it was still standing. With her magic, it should have been simple for her to vaporize an entire swath of land.

She seemed to be aware this was pretty sad. She glumly hung her head. "It doesn't go as well as when Daddy does it…"

"Pardon my intrusion. Maybe you're not making a clear enough image in your mind?" Celes offered hesitantly.

Spells required magic and a clear mental picture to serve as a blueprint. It wouldn't be very effective if either of those was lacking. As an example, Celes's body hosted incredible magic, but she couldn't imagine atomic structures, making her unable to use Shinichi's *Element Conversion* spell.

On the other hand, Shinichi didn't have much magic, which meant he couldn't *Fly* like Celes.

Rino had enough magic to cast *Resurrection*, but she couldn't form a clear image of a fireball, which explained why it was so weak. At the root of it all was her angelic disposition.

"Did you feel bad about hitting the snowman, Rino?" Shinichi asked.

"…Uh-huh."

"I think that's barricading you from imagining a fireball that can kill an opponent."

"…I'm really sorry." Rino hung her head.

Shinichi patted her on the shoulder to try and cheer her up. "You don't need to apologize. We all have our strengths and weaknesses. You don't need to force yourself to learn attack magic."

"He's right. You can leave the fighting to us," Arian assured her, but Rino stubbornly shook her head.

"I have to get stronger to protect everyone from monsters."

Up until now, she had withdrawn from battles, leaving it to her father, Shinichi, and the rest of their crew to get their hands dirty—with blood. She was ashamed of herself. Guilty.

There must have been a part of her that felt horrible for getting captured by Elazonia. She needed to be strong…but there was a strong instinct preventing her from hurting others.

Shinichi gently stroked her hair. "Your strength is in not wanting to hurt anyone. You don't have to force yourself to change."

"But…"

"You just need to learn spells that suppress your enemies without hurting them."

"Huh?" Rino seemed confused.

He slowly explained it to her. "You can keep them from moving with *Photon Bind* and make them unconscious with *Paralyze* or *Sleep*. You can stop them from fighting back without hurting them."

"Okay…"

"After that, you might be able to persuade them, and if that doesn't work, you can—"

"Kill them?"

"I guess if it's a monster, since we can't talk to them. But there's need for them to needlessly suffer. You could use *Euthanasia*, so they go peacefully to sleep."

"I've never heard of that spell."

"You can make one."

Just as Shinichi created *Element Conversion*, it was possible to make new spells a reality with enough magic and imagination.

"If they're willing to talk, you can control them with *Geas* instead of killing them. You can keep them from doing evil by limiting them from using magic or hurting others."

“I didn’t know I could do that!” Rino was over the moon to find a way to avoid killing people, but Arian looked a little upset as she listened from the side.

“Isn’t that crueler than just killing outright?” Arian asked quietly.

“Who knows?” Shinichi feigned ignorance.

If Rino cast *Geas*, only the Demon King or Regina would be able to *Dispel* it. If their daughter was willing to cast such a spell, the parents weren’t likely to show mercy to that captor. In other words, their actions would be limited for the rest of their life.

“For Rino to register someone as an enemy… Ha-ha-ha. It isn’t hard to imagine what the public would do to them.”

“I knew it was horrible…”

“What? It’s compassionate; it gives them the opportunity to reform their ways.”

It was the difference between a direct flight to hell or a local train ride through a living hell. Which was better? It depended on the person.

“I’m still worried,” whispered Arian, watching the Demon King’s daughter take to practicing *Photon Bind*. “I don’t think she’ll use her powers for evil, but binding your enemies’ bodies and minds to force them to surrender is something I’d expect from…”

“A Demon King ruling over the world? What *do* you expect from his daughter?” Shinichi joked, but there was a serious glint in his eyes. “It’s impossible for Rino to demand more land or wage war or be consumed by bigotry and try to destroy humanity.”

Well, it wasn’t impossible that she’d light the embers of war.

“I know I told her kindness is her strength, but it’s also her weakness. She won’t be able to disregard people begging for help.”

“I wouldn’t call that a weakness…” Arian looked away, but she understood what Shinichi was saying.

Rino was kind—so kind, in fact, that she couldn’t even desert Elazonia. If enough people begged her to create a world without war, she would try to help them…but that would mean a blood-soaked path of military conquest until she ruled the world.

“There’s no way to eliminate war between countries other than to conquer the world and create a single united country,” whispered Shinichi.

War couldn’t break out without other countries to fight. As he’d said in an earlier conversation with Sieg, Rino had what it took to conquer the world.

“Now that Elazonia and her horde of heroes pose no threat, there’s no one who could stop the Demon King.”

If Rino asked her idiot father to conquer the world, he would happily oblige. The followers of her religion would jump to join in such a campaign, and Sanctina would lead it.

“The ruling class might resist—since they wouldn’t want to lose their titles—and the bigots would be hard to sway, but they’d have no chance of winning.”

With an army of tens of thousands from the demon world, the Demon King and Regina would make soldiers in the human armies look like paper dolls. Once the continent of Uropeh was under a single rule, under Goddess Rino, there would be no more war.

“But that world would be about as twisted as the one controlled by Elazonia.”

“Really…?” Arian couldn’t answer immediately, thinking over this statement.

Elazonia had weaponized her immortal heroes to force people to worship her and annihilate the demons and the dragons. In contrast, a world unified under Rino wouldn’t see any discrimination based on species. It would be a peaceful one.

It was obviously impossible to eradicate all problems, since darkness remained in people’s hearts, but Arian could get down with this method if it led to peace.

However, Shinichi knew enough from history to know that there would be problems ahead.

“She might be able to make an ideal society during her lifetime. But what do you think would happen after she died?”

“Oh, right!”

Unlike Elazonia who had become a ghost, Rino would age and one day die.

They knew demons lived to be two hundred. Seeing that Rino was slow to develop compared with humans, it was safe to assume she would live longer than that. However, her life would someday come to an end, like a flame burning out. All that would remain among the people would be despair. That and a fight for the right to take her position of authority.

“It’s one of the major flaws of an absolute monarchy. Everything works as long as a good monarch is alive, but it falls into chaos once they die. Plus, there’s no guarantee the next ruler will be as good as the first.”

That’s why the low-risk democratic system was popular on Earth, but Shinichi wasn’t convinced that would function well in this world, considering a single Demon King had more power than tens of thousands of people put together.

“Either way, if something as massive as a single united country was to fracture, it’d result in unparalleled chaos and a bloodbath.”

Shinichi could see clearly how the countries would continue to break into smaller and smaller countries, eventually returning the land to micro-nations that jumbled together in war.

“Well, we’d be dead by the time that happened anyway. That’s none of my business.”

“As irresponsible as always.” Arian elbowed him in the ribs for being so heartless. She didn’t feel responsible for things that would happen after her death, but it did weigh on her conscience to ignore an oncoming disaster. “Anyway, that means we can prevent wars in the future by making sure Rino doesn’t take over the world!”

“Yep.” Shinichi nodded as Arian squeezed her fists tight. He didn’t care if a stranger went through hell after he died, but he did want to avoid a future where Rino would find herself standing atop a hill of corpses, no longer able to smile.

“But what can we actually do?” asked Arian.

“I already have a few precautions underway,” whispered Shinichi with an evil smile. “I talked about selling guns to the countries in the south and instigating a war, right? Having a small-scale battle will make the people averse to fighting. We want to prevent full-blown world wars in the future.”

As the Holy Mother Vermeita had said, now that the church wasn’t overseeing things, their repressed desires and dissatisfaction were coming through. Sooner or later, war would break out, and the longer it took, the more they would be teeming with gunpowder and greed, meaning the battle would become too large-scale and would all come crashing down.

“It would be bad if war isn’t contained in the south. If it spreads further and becomes a world war, the tired people of the world will glorify Rino.”

To prevent that, they would start a war to let off some steam early on. If this were Earth, where the dead couldn’t be brought back to life, even Shinichi would hesitate to take such a dramatic measure, but this was Obum. *Resurrection* was a reality here. This was a far more intelligent choice than dissolving into a world war. If the latter happened, they wouldn’t be able to keep up with casting the spell to bring people back, and the bodies would start to rot.

“Also, I have my reasons for arming humans with guns and leaving the church intact. They’ll deter the demons from going on a full-on rampage for world domination.” Shinichi’s voice got even lower. What he was explaining was virtually treason, because he was the Demon King’s advisor. “I don’t think it’ll happen, and I’ll do everything I can to keep it from coming to that, but if the worst was to happen—” His face clouded over.

“Leave it to me. I am a ‘hero,’ after all.” Arian nodded, flashing him a winner’s smile.

She respected the Demon King’s strength and thought of Rino as a little sister, which was exactly why she would have to stop them from going down the path of evil…even if it meant cutting them down.

Shinichi smiled back. “If that was to happen, the only problem would be the religion under Goddess Rino.”

While it had been useful in reducing faith in Elazonia and deepening friendship between demons and humans, overzealous followers could try to conquer the world under the guise of spreading the word.

“Which is a problem, since that pervy Saint doesn’t know how to rein herself in.”

“Yeah…,” Arian grumbled.

“Oh, Rino, you’re magnificent!” Sanctina cried. “Please bind me with your chains!”

“Please be quiet. You are interrupting her focus,” Celes snapped.

Shinichi looked at Sanctina coldly, but Celes had already managed to shut her up.

“Well, if it comes down to it, we can basically throw a damper on things,” Shinichi started to whisper again.

“Any good ideas?” asked Arian.

“…Hear me out, okay?” Shinichi emphasized. “The people don’t just worship Rino for her healing powers. She’s heralded as an idol. They want to support someone undefiled, innocent, and sweet.”

“Case in point: Sanctina.”

“Like any idol, her popularity will plummet if she’s wrapped up in some trouble.”

“What are we talking here?”

“Like…a scandal with her lover or a secret pregnancy.”

She clawed at his shoulder. “Shinichi?”

“I never said it would be with me!”

“Who else is there?” Her eyes turned golden, and his shoulder blade started to creak.

He tried desperately to explain himself, as a set of tanned fingers gripped his head.

“Are you having fun plotting a pregnancy scandal for an underage idol?” asked Celes.

“You were listening?!”

Celes must have been eavesdropping with magic. An angry vein throbbed in her temple as she tried to crack his skull.

With all the noise they were making, even Rino noticed and came running over.

“How could you play without me?!” She pouted unhappily.

“We’re not playing! They’re trying to kill me!” Shinichi cried out.

Once he had been freed from Arian’s and Celes’s death grips, he changed the subject to steer away the heavy air hanging around them.

“If you’re done practicing magic, I’d like to chat with you for a little bit. Is that all right?”

“Yep!” Rino said.

“Let’s go somewhere else. It’s freezing outside.”

They moved back into the Demon King’s castle and gathered in the dining hall—their usual hangout spot. They drank some tea prepared by Celes and took a short break. Once Shinichi saw that they were rested, he finally brought up the topic in question.

“I’ve been thinking of starting a school here.”

“Sch…ool?” Rino was confused by the strange new word.

“Yeah. A place for kids to study together. Have you heard of it?”

Rino shook her head. “We didn’t have any in the demon world.”

“I have seen some dojos that teach battle arts. Is it the same thing?” asked Celes, slightly off the mark.

Sanctina watched them, then quietly raised her hand. “It’s a center of learning where you learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic. There are some schools in the larger cities, like the Holy City. I assume that’s what you mean?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Shinichi was relieved to hear they existed in human society. “I plan to build one by the castle for the neighboring human and demon children to study together.”

“I think it’s a good idea, but what’s your end goal?” asked Arian, looking at Shinichi with eyes that said she was certain he wasn’t just doing it out of the goodness of his heart.

Shinichi grinned broadly. “The first goal is to improve human education as a whole and encourage scientific advancement. We also want to bait people with new knowledge and forge friendships with them.”

At present, Rino was popular to a worrying degree, and the Blue Demon King had become an object of fear and admiration for eliminating Elazonia. However, that didn’t mean it changed hatred toward demons as a collective.

“There’s no way to remove the prejudices ingrained by the Goddess’s church and make people like demons other than to have them come around and understand them. But no sane person is going to volunteer to wander into the lion’s den without incentive.”

“Very true.” Sanctina agreed. Even she got something out of betraying the church and joining the demons, and that was to be with Rino, her one true love.

“We don’t want to act unless we have something to gain. In reverse, that means you only need to give someone incentive to make them act. In this case, it’s a school where they can learn.”

“Will the humans really take that bait?” asked Celes.

Shinichi had an evil grin. “Maybe not in the beginning, but they will in the future. Once they know they can learn to create gunpowder and guns.”

“…I see.” Celes was both scared and proud that Shinichi had considered every angle.

Right now, rumors about gunpowder had only spread as far as Boar Kingdom, where they still didn’t know its true value. Once the snow melted and Tigris started selling guns, the world would come to know its power, proving that “demon knowledge” was valuable. Once that happened, potential students would be rushing to learn at the school, even if they incurred massive fees to do so.

“Human and demon children will live and learn together. There will be conflicts, but it’s way better than now. As it is, no one knows anything about

one another and they just hate one another because of prejudice," said Shinichi.

Even in the ancient civilization, there was a huge rift between the demons and humans. Shinichi wasn't arrogant enough to believe he could completely heal that divide, but the world would never change if he didn't do anything.

"If they continue to learn together, friendships and even romantic relationships will bridge that divide. I want to slowly keep increasing the circle of friendship."

"Wow! That sounds amazing!" exclaimed Rino.

"By the way, I want to have you attend, too. Does that sound good?"

"Really? Yay!" Rino hopped up and down, knowing she could be making human friends.

Shinichi smiled, then turned to the Demon King. "So I'd like to build a school. What do you think?"

The Blue Demon King had been silent until now. "You can build your school or what have you," he managed to say, "but I am opposed to Rino attending."

"Why is that?"

"What would I do if Rino was negatively influenced by her friends and went rogue?!" He clenched his fist.

"Okaaaaay. Just the usual father stuff." Shinichi was exasperated, but he sent the Demon King a telepathic message so that Rino couldn't hear them talking.

"I thought I told you. It's not good to be overprotective. It's better for her to have friends her own age. And now is our chance."

"Hmph. Why do you have to remember such an old conversation…?"

They'd had this conversation right around the time Sanctina had come to attack. It made Shinichi feel a little nostalgic, but he pressed the hesitant father.

"Rino is growing up quickly. Soon, she'll even learn to Teleport. You can't keep her locked in a cage forever. Isn't it better for her to learn interpersonal skills in plain view than to have her go out on her own and get tricked by some stranger?"

"Urgggh… Then…it should be a girls' school. I cannot allow boys to look at Rino with romantic intentions!"

"No. It's especially important for her to talk to boys."

Besides, she was most in danger with the pervy Saint.

"We'll eliminate those with ulterior motives in the application phase, and we're starting with children under the age of twelve. They shouldn't really be interested in girls at that age," Shinichi assured him.

"But I'm worried…" The Demon King continued to hesitate.

Rino tugged on his arm, looking up with puppy-dog eyes. "Daddy, please. I want to go to school and make friends."

"Urgh, I want to grant as many of your wishes as I can, but…"

“If you won’t allow it…I’ll go on another trip.”

“School it is!” The Blue Demon King immediately caved under her threats to run away from home.

“Yaaaaay, I love you, Daddy!” Rino hugged her father, all smiles that her wish had been granted.

Arian let out a small sigh. “And what if she starts saying, ‘I want the world’? You’re the one who taught her how to whine, Shinichi.” She glared at him.

“…I know…” Shinichi looked away uncomfortably before looking at Rino, who was jumping around in excitement about school.

I can finally get Rino some friends her own age, he thought.

Shinichi hid his sad smile from Rino, then delegated jobs to his team so they could prepare everything they needed for the school.

A week after the letter had been delivered to Boar Kingdom, Arian and Celes went to visit the kingdom again to pick up the ambassadors—the new students for the school.

“Arian, these are the diplomats for our country,” said the knight captain, introducing three boys and two girls.

All of them were outfitted in fine clothing, and their faces looked like they were well-fed. They were clearly nobility.

They must have been scared to head off to the demon lair, even though they’d been promised that the hero who had killed the evil god would protect them.

Arian smiled gently at the children, who were desperately trying to hide their trembling. “I look forward to spending the next two months with all of you.”

“““Thank you!””” The children were all nervous, but they managed to reply.

“Captain, thank you for trusting your precious children to our care,” said Arian.

“They’re still young, but I hope they can become a bridge of friendship between our two countries.”

Arian and the captain exchanged good-byes, then she invited the children to huddle close. Celes cast *Teleport*. They were surrounded by blinding light and disappeared from Boar Kingdom, arriving a moment later in the Demon King’s castle.

“Is this the demons’ castle?”

They all seemed curious as they looked around the stone room, not all that different from a human castle other than the magic circle drawn on the floor.

While they were looking around, the space beside them started to illuminate, materializing Saint Sanctina with five other boys and girls.

“Wait! Wh-who are they?”

“The same as you, but invited from Tigris,” explained Arian to the startled noble children. Then she looked at the kids accompanying Sanctina. They wore quality clothing, though it wasn’t as flashy as the aristocratic children. They appeared to be children from merchant families.

Looking at their faces, Arian creased her brow. “One boy and four girls…”

They were all adorable. If the one boy hadn’t been wearing trousers, he would have blended in with the girls.

Arian glared at the Saint, but her smile didn’t waver in the slightest.

“I simply selected them according to Shinichi’s orders. There was no ulterior motive whatsoever,” said Sanctina.

“It’s true there was no requirement about their appearance, but…” Celes glared, knowing the Saint had selected the children completely based on her own preferences.

Arian realized that the children were still there, trying to piece together the adults’ conversation, and she rushed to change the topic. “Everyone, follow me, please.”

She left the room and walked down the corridors of the Demon King’s castle. The group from Boar Kingdom was still scared, but those from Tigris seemed to teem with curiosity as they trotted after her. They passed through a connecting corridor that led them out of the castle into a mansion so extravagant it was hard to imagine it was thrown together with magic. That was the first time they set foot in Demon King’s Academy.

“I’ll show you your rooms.” Arian led them up the stairs from the entrance hall to the second floor. It looked like any normal corridor with rows of rooms on either side.

“Boys are on the right, and girls are on the left.”

“They’re doubles, but we have enough space for each of you to have your own room.” Sanctina urged them to choose whichever one they wanted.

The children were still somewhat thrown for a loop, but they consulted their group and picked rooms near one another. The dorm rooms themselves were a decent size. Each was furnished with two beds, two desks, and two wardrobes. The children placed their things on the desks and took a moment to rest before turning to the clothing hung in the wardrobes.

“What’s this?”

The outfits supplied in the boys’ rooms had black blazers with standing band collars and black trousers. The girls’ rooms had navy jackets and skirts. Each room had three sets of sizes in small, medium, and large.

Arian called through the doors to explain, since none of the children had heard of school uniforms before. “Please change into the clothing in your room. Let us know if the sizes don’t fit. We can adjust them for you.”

“…Weird.”

Even though the children found it strange, they obliged, donning the unfamiliar clothing. They came out of their rooms with stupefied faces, and Sanctina beamed at them.

"A sliver of knee peeking out between navy skirts and socks… Fine art!"

"Let's reel it in," Arian warned.

Sanctina had turned from Rino lover to all-around pervert.

Arian could see the effect of the uniforms. With the same clothes, you can't tell if they're a commoner or aristocrat…

"Clothing is a symbol of status," Shinichi had said when he had the arachnes start making these outfits. "One glance is all it takes to determine their social standing, hometown, and class. To form friendships on equal footing, we want to foster a feeling of belonging—hence, these uniforms."

She had wondered why he would do such a thing, but she understood now that she could see the results for herself. Once the students wore their new outfits, they started to feel a sense of unity, allowing them to warm up to one another—even though they had been complete strangers from different backgrounds.

"All right, let's head to the classroom."

Now that they were changed, Arian led the students back down the stairs to the first floor and opened the door on the main wall of the entrance hall.

Before them was a large classroom with twenty desks and chairs arranged in rows. The homeroom teacher, Shinichi, was standing with his back to the blackboard on the right-hand side of the room, waiting for the students.

"Good morning. Can I have the Tigris group sit in the middle seats and the Boar group in the seats closest to the entrance hall?"

"Y-yes!"

The children were balls of nerves, listening to the man who landed the killing blow on Elazonia. As soon as they stepped into the room, they noticed something.

There were already five desks occupied near the sunlit window. As soon as the Boar group saw them, they tensed up.

"Demons…!"

There was a dark elf with tanned skin and pointed ears, a dvergr who was short but a ball of muscle, a Wampus cat with triangle ears poking from her head and a furry tail swaying behind her, and a green dryad with leaflike hair.

They wore the same uniforms as the rest of the students. They were human-shaped but clearly different. The children from the Boar Kingdom were frozen in place with fear.

The Tigris group rushed in to talk to the demon sitting at the head of the group—a little girl with black hair who looked exactly like a human.

"Rino!"

"I only came because I heard I'd be able to see you again!"

Many of them had already met her during one of her healing sessions or postconcert meet and greets. They were undeterred by the demons around them, clustering around Rino.

“I’m so happy I can study with you, Elma, and everyone else!” Rino took their hands, jumping up and down.

Shinichi smiled wryly at the children from Boar Kingdom, standing with their jaws slack, openly staring.

He raised his voice. “Quiet down. Everyone, take your seats.”

“Yes.”

Rino and the Tigris group obediently followed their teacher’s orders and took their seats. The others saw this and rushed into their seats as well.

“Welcome to Demon King’s Academy. As you’re aware, you’ve been invited to build friendly relationships between humans and demons. I want you all to learn, play, and talk together to understand one another during the coming two months until the end of winter.”

Shinichi stopped speaking for a moment to slowly look around at the faces of the nervous children from Boar Kingdom, the excited kids from Tigris, and the demons sitting quietly but growing impatient.

“Let’s go around and introduce ourselves. I’m Shinichi Sotoyama, I will be your instructor. Please call me ‘Mr. Sotoyama.’ Next. You there. What is your name?”

“Norman, third son of Baron Siamese.” The boy from Boar Kingdom managed to introduce himself properly despite his nerves.

They went around the room, introducing themselves in turn, until it came to Rino.

“My name is Rinoladell Krolow Petrara, daughter of Da—I mean, daughter of the Blue Demon King Ludabite. Please call me Rino.”

She bowed her head politely, and the demons and children from Tigris clapped.

The others seemed curious and cautious of her, since they only knew her from rumors and the broadcast of the final battle against Elazonia.

“Is that the Superstar Goddess, the one who delivers salvation to all people with her infinite love and songs…?”

“You perv!” Shinichi whirled around to glare at the culprit inching closer to the wall. “Didn’t I warn you not to stir up any more religious fervor?”

“It’s out of my control!” The misandrist desperately tried to explain, sweat beading on her face, as he reached out to punish her.

He’d recounted his conversation with Arian on world domination to Sanctina, instructing her to hold off on her religious activities, but it appeared the name “Superstar Goddess” was already picking up speed.

“I knew Lady Rino’s fame would be known throughout the human world, *meow*!”

“I’m a member of her church, too!”

The demons seemed proud, and the children of Tigris were gleeful. Rino was red from shyness, shrinking in size like she would have crawled into a hole if there had been one.

“Okay. It shouldn’t matter if someone’s a superstar or a princess. Here, you’re all equals. Don’t be weird and lift others up or put them down,” Shinichi warned.

“Huh…?” The students blinked in confusion.

I guess it’s asking too much of them to completely forget status and race and cross divides right away.

That’s why he’d brought them here—to experience the joys and sorrows of life and friendship. Shinichi had assumed the role of teacher to prevent their preparations from going to waste.

“Make sure you remember your classmates’ names. Now on to the lesson.”

Shinichi snapped his fingers, and Celes came in from where she’d been waiting outside. She pushed a cart full of writing supplies and started handing them out to the students.

“Please handle them with care. It’s not a big deal if you break them—we have extras.”

The students were so surprised by the supplies that Celes’s warning didn’t even register.

“You have so much pure-white paper… Are you sure we can use it?!”

“This pen is amazing! It doesn’t make your hands dusty like chalk, and the letters don’t bleed like with a quill pen!”

“That’s called a pencil. You can erase your lines with this white eraser.”

“Really? Whoa! What is this sorcery?!”

Paper books were very valuable, and the only writing utensil generally available was a quill pen. The demons had made a number of classroom supplies based on Shinichi’s knowledge, to which the children let out small gasps of delight.

“If we could sell this pencil and eraser…” The merchant child immediately started thinking business.

“Do what you want, but we’re going to start the lesson now.” Shinichi smiled, clapping his hands together to quiet down the class. “Our first class will be on the peak of academia and the basis of everything: math.”

He intentionally tried to make it sound cool, then turned to the blackboard and wrote a simple problem on the board. “What is fifteen plus seven?”

“Umm, one, two, three…” Rino and the other demons started counting using their fingers. The human students looked at them in wonder.

“Twenty two, right?”

“Correct,” said Shinichi, smiling at the boy from Boar Kingdom who’d answered.

While an illiterate farmer’s child might not have even been able to do math, the nobles and merchants could obviously handle basic addition and subtraction.

“Next question. What’s twenty-five times seven?”

“Huh? What does *times* mean?” The demons didn’t even know the concept of multiplication.

“Ummm, seven groups of twenty-five…” The noble from Boar Kingdom knew what he was talking about, though it took him some time to solve the question, since he didn’t multiply things very often.

One of the daughters of a merchant from Tigris must have used it on the daily, because she quickly raised her hand. “One seventy-five.”

“Correct. That was fast.”

The girl smiled bashfully.

“Hmph…,” Rino pouted, but Shinichi was busy looking around at all the students.

“As you can see from that little test, it seems like there’s some difference in your ability to do math. I’m going to have you all study at a level appropriate for you.” Shinichi had guessed this might be the case, which was why he was prepared. “Arian, please teach the demons addition. You’ll use that textbook—*First Grade*.”

“Roger.”

“Sanctina, you work on times tables—up to multiples of nine—with the Boar kids. The book for second graders.”

“Leave it to me.”

“And I’ll work on long division with the Tigris team. If we have time, we can move on to decimals and fractions.”

Shinichi picked up the third-grade books from Celes's cart and handed them out to the merchant children. He'd pulled what he learned on Earth out of his memory with *Search*, then used *Healing* to mend any wrist inflammation while he transferred the information to paper. He ended up with these gems.

The students' eyes grew wide at the sight of the textbooks, which were better than any other course material they'd ever seen. Shinichi started to carefully teach them math. About thirty minutes passed when the dark elf boy shouted in annoyance.

"Mr. Sotoyama, why should I even learn this stuff?"

"What?" The human children let out small cries of surprise.

"Why? If you can't do math, you can't buy things," replied a girl from Tigris, but the dark elf just seemed more perplexed by her answer.

"If you want to buy something, you can trade meat and clothes for it. You don't need…*this*."

"…Huh?" Something wasn't clicking in their conversation.

Shinichi was happy that there were these small disparities. "Demon society has currency, but it's more common to barter and trade," he explained.

Their lack of knowledge on this wasn't because they were uncivilized. Quite the opposite, in fact. It was just a facet of their society.

Their country had been founded on the basis that strength meant everything. The strongest one was king. Unlike human society, the child of a demon king didn't automatically become the next king by virtue of their blood.

In the end, strength was the only real proof of a king. No one would follow a weak ruler. If there was someone confident in their strength, they might try to usurp the existing king, which was a commendable act according to demon standards. Power was everything. Strength was justice. That was the only absolute in demon society.

"That's why demon countries are founded often and destroyed regularly," Shinichi said.

They were hunters who lived off the monsters they killed. There was little necessity to protect fields and farms, and they weren't tied to the land. That made it easy for them to come together and separate over and over.

"To expand on currency—it only has value when its country of origin exists. Demon society doesn't have much trust in it because countries are so easily torn down. Instead, they focus on trading."

"Huh…" was all the students managed when they got a social studies lesson they didn't bargain for.

Shinichi smiled wryly and turned to look at the dark elf boy.

"We were talking about whether math has any use, and the answer is yes, absolutely," declared Shinichi.

If humans began conducting more trade with the demons, math would be essential to make sure the demons weren't being conned during the

exchange. He found it hard to imagine a demon would be satisfied with this explanation, so Shinichi explained it in a way they would find interesting.

"It's useful for winning a battle."

"Really?!" He started to look a lot more interested.

Shinichi grinned as he wrote another problem on the chalkboard.

"Let's say you have three hundred men in your troop, and you're fighting against six thousand enemies. How many opponents does each person need to defeat in order to win?"

"Uh…a lot!"

"Daddy could beat them all by himself!"

"If you don't know, just be honest, all right?" Shinichi gently urged the dark elf boy and Rino, then called on a girl from the Boar Kingdom. "What's the answer?"

"Six thousand divided by three hundred is twenty people."

"Correct."

The demons gasped happily.

"See? Math has many applications. And it's the basis of understanding science, which we'll cover in the next class."

"Oh, we get to study science?" asked Rino, who was familiar with the term.

"What's that?"

Rino had heard this word on more than one occasion from Shinichi, but the other students weren't familiar with it.

Shinichi wanted to pique the children's interests. "Science is great. If you study it, you can understand how the world works and be able to use spells like this."

He took out a lump of coal he'd hidden in his pocket and quietly cast magic on it.

"Disorganized carbon connections—realign in orderly beauty to transform your shape, *Element Conversion*."

Magical light burst from his palm, and the jet-black coal turned into a translucent diamond.

"""Aaaah!"""

"Here, take a close look." Shinichi set down the diamond in front of the startled students.

"It's hard… It's the real thing!"

"It's so sparkly. Amazing, *meow*!"

"Let me see! Let me see!"

The students gathered around the diamond, forgetting they were in the middle of class, and stared at the shining stone. In particular, the dvergr boy couldn't hide his excitement, thinking he'd be able to make the ideal equipment if he had that magic.

"This is how math and science can be useful. That's why you need to study hard."

"""Yes, Mr. Sotoyama!"""

All the students nodded, eyes shining, including the dark elf boy who hadn't been motivated a moment before.

Hee-hee-hee. You really can make people do things with obvious bait.

Not everyone could to make themselves suffer through years of study and tests for an uncertain gain far in the future.

Shinichi looked happily at all the students, now focused on their textbooks, lured by their own desires.

They wrapped up their indoor lessons—math and then science. Other than Rino, the demon meatheads had run out of steam for concentration by the third hour of lessons.

Shinichi passed out gym clothes to the students. "Next is physical education. We'll be exercising."

"Yaaaay!"

"Urgh…"

As many students started to chatter in glee, the girls from Boar Kingdom screwed up their faces in disgust. They headed out of the classroom to change, followed by the Tigris girls. Meanwhile, the demon girls—all except for Rino—started to pull off their uniforms right there, not caring that boys were present.

"Aaaah! Tama! Aloe! What are you doing?!" cried Rino.

"What? We're changing, *meow*."

"…Uh-huh."

"You can't do it here!" Rino pushed the two out of the classroom.

One Boar Kingdom boy watched them leave and tried to divert the attention away from his blushing cheeks. "H-how shameless!"

"Really? I don't think it's anything to get worked up about," noted the dark elf.

He continued changing, completely unfazed. He was desensitized to seeing girls in their underwear, since topless mermaids and nearly nude succubi were always around him.

"…You're so mature." The boy looked at the dark elf with respect.

"What? You're weirding me out." His brow creased.

Shinichi smiled, watching the exchange. "Such curiosities bring boys together."

"Stop being stupid. We need to go." Celes pinched Shinichi's cheek, almost as punishment for him seeing the catgirl in underwear.

They led the changed students to the gymnasium, which had been built next to the school building.

"Wow! It's so big!"

"Even the ballroom in the castle isn't half this size…"

The gym was designed based on Shinichi's memories, spacious enough for a game of basketball or volleyball. The size left the students wide-eyed.

Shinichi turned to them. “All right, let’s start with ten laps around the gym.”

“Ten whole laps?!” shrieked the girls from Boar Kingdom.

“You got it!” The demons and the boys dashed off.

“If you collapse, this kind Saint will heal you. Off you go.” Shinichi clapped his hands to hurry them on. The Boar Kingdom girls reluctantly started walking.

The catgirl zipped past them several times, finishing the ten laps in less than two minutes.

“First, *meow*!”

“Aren’t you dizzy?!” Shinichi gawked at her physical abilities. She was able to maintain a 32-feet-per-second rate for the full ten laps without losing any speed on corners.

After her was the dark elf, then the dvergr, the dryad, and Rino.

“The demons clearly have a higher physical-ability level.”

Even battle-averse Rino had mastered her dance practice and traveled far on foot, making her base physicality completely different from the humans’.

The Boar Kingdom boys finally finished roughly a full minute after the demons.

“Huff, huff… So this is what the demons are capable of…”

The noble sons were confident in their physical prowess, as they’d studied swordplay and horseback riding in their youth. That’s why they were so upset when they felt the insurmountable difference between the two races.

“I can’t believe I lost to some catgirl…”

“What’s that? If you’ve got a problem with me, just come at me, *meow*!” The catgirl’s tail started to bristle.

Shinichi gently placed himself between the two children. “All right, all right. If you want to fight, you can do it during the break.”

“They shouldn’t fight during the break, either,” chastised Rino from behind him as he pulled the two students apart.

Meanwhile, the girls from Boar Kingdom had somehow managed to finish the ten laps around the gym, even if they lagged behind the rest of the students.

Shinichi waited for them to catch their breath. “All right, now that you’re warmed up, we’re going to start a special lesson only available here at Demon King’s Academy: magic.”

“”“…Huh?””” The children were frozen with shock.

“Wait. We can’t use magic!”

“Hee-hee, how sad, *meow*.” The catgirl was poking fun at the boy from Boar Kingdom as payback.

Shinichi placed his hands on their heads to keep them quiet as they were about to start arguing again, then turned to the human students to explain.

“I’m aware none of you, other than the five demons, can use magic. With enough training, though, humans can cast spells.”

“Really?”

“I haven’t always been able to use magic, after all.”

“What?!”

Shinichi had only just shown them *Element Conversion*, so the students let out gasps of disbelief when they heard he’d started off with no magic at all. Rino was able to testify on his behalf, since she knew what he had gone through.

“It’s true. Shinichi couldn’t use magic in the beginning, but after me and Celes cast tons of spells on him, he could!”

“It’s kept a secret from the general populace, and it’s rarely practiced because it takes so much effort, but the Goddess’s church uses the same method to raise magic users,” added Sanctina. She herself had spent her childhood having spells cast on her by the Elderly Cardinal Cronklum, which eventually led to her being the genius she was.

“Then, that means we can…?”

“You can use magic, too,” said Shinichi.

The human students gulped audibly in excitement.

They had good reason to be eager. If they could unlock the secret power, they could stand at the top of the social hierarchy—with money and clout. Any adult in their situation would be frothing at the mouth, ready to get started.

“If I can be a magic user, I can bump my older brothers out of line and become baron instead…”

Shinichi looked coolly at the Boar Kingdom boy whose ambitions were getting the best of him.

They don’t even know they’ll be taken down a peg or two when we introduce them to the insurmountable Demon King, he thought. Cute.

“*You bring them up to tear them down. You’re so nasty*,” Celes snapped through *Telepathy* as she watched over the class from beside the wall.

Shinichi smiled. “That’s just another lesson. It’s great to aim high, but too much ambition will destroy them. I’m not taking away their right to chase their dreams, but it’s important they’re aware of how they measure up.”

Shinichi had lost his childhood friend because irresponsible adults kept pushing her to her limits.

“All right, let’s start the lesson.”

As part of the class, he was going to have them do a little experiment, which he kept as a secret from the students, calling over Celes and the other teachers over to join them.

“First, let’s join hands and form a big circle.”

“Okay!” said Rino.

“I call the spot next to Rino. Oh, and a girl on the other side, please,” requested Sanctina.

“Your allergic reaction to men still hasn’t gone away?” Rino asked.

“Maybe with special training,” said Shinichi as Rino squeezed his right hand in hers.

On the other side of Rino was Sanctina, followed by Celes and Arian.

“You want me to hold hands with a demon…?”

“If you don’t like it, then get away, *meow*!”

The Boar Kingdom boy and catgirl were at it again, but they obediently joined hands, giving in to their dreams to be magic users.

“All right. We’re going to spread magic into your bodies through our joined hands,” explained Shinichi.

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. The kids from Tigris might remember doing this before.”

“I do! When I was helping Sanctina before!” called out a girl named Elma.

Shinichi nodded back to her. In fact, she was the reason he’d even thought of trying this experiment.

“Sanctina, you can take over from here,” he instructed.

“Understood.”

They had practiced this among just the teachers, so Sanctina was able to start her explanation without any hesitation.

“Start by taking some deep breaths, in and out.”

“Haaaah. Huffff.”

“Are you feeling relaxed? We’re all going to distribute magic to the person on our right. Don’t try to resist. Just focus on passing the warmth you feel coming from your left hand all the way through you and into the person on your right.”

“Ummm, left to right…”

Sanctina waited a moment for all the students to process this information, then she closed her eyes and started to concentrate. “All right. Let’s begin.”

The Saint took the magic activated in her body and passed it through her right hand to Celes, who then passed it on to Arian, and then into the students.

“Aaah?!”

The Boar Kingdom children let out yelps of surprise at the strange sensation, but the magic continued to flow down the line and finally reached Shinichi.

“If you feel anything strange in your body, don’t suffer through it. Let us know.”

It spread through their bodies a few more rounds. Sanctina delicately controlled the flow, gradually increasing the speed and heat.

If this goes as planned, they’ll be magic users in no time.

Every human had a magic system in their body that was always generating this secret power, even if the amount was minuscule. It had to be true, considering every person had magic sucked from them if they

touched a magic conductor. It just didn't mean they had enough energy to convert their imaginations into reality.

It's basically a muscle group.

Muscles atrophied without use. In a similar way, the magic production systems remained weak when people didn't expend their powers. That was why you could force magic into the system by casting a spell to make it start working until it was functional.

Like a magic version of an Ab-O-Matic belt.

The problem was efficiency—they'd cast hundreds of spells on Shinichi for him to reach his current level. That was where this plan came in.

Instead of expending magic on spells, they would do this "rotational training," which moved the same amount of magic through a circle forever.

We already have a case study that proves it's effective.

Shinichi looked at the girl standing across the circle from him: Elma. She looked like she could still handle more.

When broadcasting the events with Elazonia to the entire continent, Sanctina had joined hands with this exact girl. Shinichi had questioned whether Sanctina had chosen Elma to attend Demon King's Academy because of her own feelings toward her, but Sanctina had denied it with a shake of her head.

"Í took heed of your order," she had said, "and selected normal kids with a tendency for magic and experience in a learning setting." She had seemed a little apprehensive. "But I swear I felt no magic from Elma when I first met her. Did something make her grow that quickly in such a short period?"

Shinichi quickly realized the cause. Tens of thousands of people's concentrated magic had gathered to Sanctina—through Elma. That had kicked her development into overdrive.

I admit it was careless. I was painfully aware that exposure to magic was enough.

He thought of the beast morphs in the restricted zone and the little girl, Elen, and others exposed to the dragons' magic waves. A powerful external source had boosted their magic incredibly fast.

If they're overexposed, they'll turn into beasts, since their bodies won't be able to handle it. As long as we're careful, they should be able to use magic while keeping their human forms.

The magic surging through his body became gradually hotter, causing the human children to start to sweat.

"Agh…"

When Shinichi saw one of the Boar Kingdom girls keel over in pain, he called for them to stop.

"Sanctina!"

"Let the life power inside your body shine even brighter, *Self Healing Power Boost*."

Sanctina didn't need to be told. She stopped the flow of magic around the circle and released it as a *Healing* spell. A gentle light filtered over the

students, and they all stood up with renewed energy, even the girl who had fallen to her knees.

“How about we do a quick test to see how our training is going?” Shinichi gave Celes the cue.

She nodded, telling the human students the same thing she had taught Shinichi before.

“There is no need to overthink things. Spells are nothing more than a way of using magic to change reality to meet your imagination.”

“We can change reality…?”

“Imagine a flame,” said Celes, and a small flame flickered up from her fingertip. “Draw a picture of one inside your mind, then believe that it will ignite from your finger.”

“A red flame…burns…”

“Do you feel the warmth of magic welling up inside you? Concentrate that into your fingertip, speak an incantation, and release the spell.”

“Burn flame! *Fire*!” they shouted, holding an image of fire in their minds. A tiny red flame sputtered for just a brief moment from the fingers of five out of the ten human students.

“Whoa! It really worked!”

“Hey! Why won’t mine do the thing?!”

“Looks like a success.” Shinichi watched the children create a big fuss and nodded in satisfaction.

Sanctina’s eyes were wide. “I didn’t doubt you, but I just can’t believe it can be so easy to make so many magic users…”

“Well, you can’t really call them magic users yet.”

The students were fumbling to light a flame again, while Shinichi and the other instructors moved over to the wall so the students couldn’t hear them talking.

“If we keep this up, I imagine they’ll all be able to light some kindling. We’ll be lucky, though, if even one of them turns into a magic user powerful enough to heal major injuries or defeat monsters,” said Shinichi.

He sounded harsh, but there was a huge difference in magic talent between individuals. Even though her pervy antics seemed to overshadow her talent, Sanctina was a genius—one in a million. Not everyone was capable of becoming even close to her.

“I think it’s incredible that anyone can learn to use magic!” Arian exclaimed.

“I agree,” said Sanctina.

Compared to the method of casting hundreds of spells on a person, Shinichi’s rotational training would be able to generate large amounts of skilled magic users using very little magic. If this method became widespread, it wouldn’t be too far off in the future before all of humanity could use magic.

“I don’t know why no one ever thought of this. It’s so simple…” Sanctina looked to the heavens.

“It takes a lot of courage to try a new method that might fail when you’ve already got one that’s proven to work,” Shinichi explained. “I do think there are people who thought of this rotational training before me.”

“Really?!” Arian cried.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it.” Sanctina looked doubtful.

They didn’t think of it simply because they were at the apex of humankind.

“Think about it. Would *magic users* be happy if there were more magic users?” asked Shinichi.

“Uh, but that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Arian cocked her head to the side, a good person at heart.

“…Interesting.”

Sanctina had seen how wretched humans could be during her time at the church. She grimaced, realizing quickly what Shinichi was saying.

“No idiot would be happy to have competition,” the Saint explained.

“Exactly. Magic users are valuable *because* of their rarity,” said Shinichi.

If diamonds were as common as any normal pebble, no one would shell out a fortune to buy one. In the same way, magic users would become *valueless* if all humans could cast spells.

“In fact, you can say the ‘strong’ only exist by virtue of comparison to the ‘weak.’”

Value was relative. Someone who could smash a boulder with their fist was considered strong only because most people couldn’t manage to do the same thing. If every human could blow a mountain to smithereens, the boulder smasher would be ridiculed.

“Basically, for the magic users to be at the top, they need people below them.”

It was just like it took thousands of exploited workers to make a single rich person or a horde of soldiers to carry a hero to victory.

“As long as there’s a social hierarchy with magic users at the top, there will always be people who can’t cast spells under them. Even if someone did think of this rotational training, they wouldn’t let the world know of their discovery—or they would be six feet under.”

That was exactly what happened in the ancient civilization: A divide between magic users and non–magic users remained unaddressed, ending in terrorist attacks launched by beast morphs.

The situation wasn’t that dire yet, but the church used to have all people who could cast *Healing* and *Resurrection* spells under their control. If the church had continued to expand its power, they would have repeated history. It could even have led to the birth of a new Elazonia.

“But I’m not in the business of magic. I’m fine with getting rich from charging students astronomical fees to enroll in Demon King’s Academy—where you, too, can learn to become a magic user!”

“You’re just asking to be dogpiled.” Celes sighed.

Shinichi grinned. “Ha-ha-ha, it’s my job to be despicable.”

My only reservation is that the boom in magic users might slow scientific development…, he thought.

He was hoping they could decrease their workload by becoming like the elves, who were hardly working. That would leave more human resources to allocate to other uses and maybe lead to newer technologies.

I imagine this won't be easy, but it's important to benefit the bottom line and narrow the status gap. We don't want to repeat the same mistakes as the ancient civilization…

Shinichi looked up at Rino mingling with the other students.

"Drat! Why can't I get this to work…?"

"Heh-heh! Humans are so pathetic, *meow*."

"What did you say?!"

"Tama, you shouldn't tease people! Norman, I'll try lending you some magic. Will you try one more time?" Rino asked.

"I feel that hot energy flowing through me again… Come on, *Fire*!" Norman chanted.

Rino was taking on the role of older sister, since she had more experience under her belt. With her guidance, even the struggling students were able to create a fire—to their great excitement.

Shinichi had one wish as he watched the scene. I want Rino to make friends that are on equal footing with her.

Uropeh had been controlled by a friendless girl with no peers to stop her from hurting others…until she became evil incarnate.

There was a chance that Rino—heralded as the "Goddess" in the footsteps of Elazonia—might go down the same blood-soaked path. Shinichi had no intentions of letting anyone do anything to cloud Rino's smile, but…

We can't always be by her side.

He could hope for another seventy years at best, even if he had a long life. Meanwhile, Rino would live for another hundred and fifty years…maybe more. That meant Shinichi, Arian, Celes, even Sanctina, would only be by her side for half of her life.

I know it's only normal for the oldest people to die first, but it would be miserable to be around for decades after…

Even her parents—the Demon King and Regina—would perish before her. Once she was left all on her own, she would be driven mad in the way only solitude can do. Her smile would be lost forever. Imagining that crushed Shinichi's heart so much he thought it would break.

I honestly couldn't care less about world peace.

He just didn't want the day to come when Rino would be left in a world without her friends, used and abused by the public, until she become as spiteful as Elazonia.

I know I'm being as overprotective as the Demon King right now…

He wanted to make sure Rino had some friends her own age who could support her even when everyone else was gone.

The problem is that a human wouldn't live much longer than us.

If he continued to run the school, the students would interact with the real Rino—not some goddess or superstar—while he continued to educate the younger generation. He could also try finding students from other demon races with longer life spans.

Rino must have noticed his gaze, because she beamed and waved at him. He waved back with a smile, concealing every hint of sadness in his heart.

Two weeks after classes had started at Demon King's Academy, the instructors were heading to the classroom for the first block of the day when they heard a commotion from inside. They stood just outside the doorway.

"What's happening?" Shinichi cracked open the door to peek inside.

Inside, he saw the catgirl, Tama, and the third son of Baron Siamese, Norman, shouting at each other.

"I dare you to say that one more time, *meow*!"

"Yeah? I'll say it as many times I want!"

"Calm down, please!" Rino shouted.

"She's right! We're supposed to be the representatives of our countries. We have to get along…"

The other students tried to calm them, but the angry pair wasn't listening. They were facing off in the middle of the classroom, looking like they were about to fight any moment.

"Those two…," Shinichi said.

"We have to stop them!" Arian tried to rush into the classroom, but he stopped her.

"Wait. Let them continue."

"But if they start fighting…"

"That's fine." Shinichi understood her concern, but he looked stern. He wouldn't let her intervene.

The students didn't realize the teachers were watching. Tama and Norman raised their voices.

"What's wrong with calling someone stupid, if they're really stupid?! You still can't even subtract two digits, dummy!"

"Look who's talking! You can't even cast *Fire* by yourself, so who's the real dummy here, *meow*?"

"There's no connection between magic and intelligence!"

"Oh maybe, *meow*. Anyway, I have no business talking to someone who can't even win a race against a girl, *meow*."

"Sh-shut up, catgirl! You smell like an animal! Pee-ew! Take a bath!"

"I take a bath every other day, thank you very much, *meow*!"

The surrounding students were at a loss for what to do. Shinichi smiled wryly.

"It's your average little kid fight."

But this verbal attack between Norman and Tama was like a mini version of the conflict that was eventually going to happen between humans and demons.

"Even if they have the same origin, humans and demons have become separate races. They don't just *look* different. They have physical, magical, and intellectual disparities. Their understanding of common sense and customs are different. It's hard to believe they'll get along without a problem."

"…I suppose," said Celes unhappily.

There was infighting between demons and even between humans. It was natural for fights to break out between different species, too.

"Rino wishes for humans and demons to coexist," said Sanctina.

"Which is why we shouldn't stop them here. It's better if they blow off steam." Shinichi raised his hand to stop her from mediating. "There will be greater disputes someday. Even after we've gone."

"Shinichi…," Arian whispered.

They could guess the true meaning of his statement when he gritted his teeth in frustration. The instructors looked worried, but they obediently stayed put. Shinichi's expression was resolute as he continued to watch Norman and Tama bicker, and Rino desperately try to get between them.

Only in fairy tales can you defeat the big, bad wolf and live happily ever after. Real life isn't so easy.

This fight was symptomatic of larger and smaller issues that wouldn't be solved anytime soon: monster attacks, human war, anti-demon terrorism. There was even the possibility that another Demon King would come attack the surface human world.

Shinichi was going to die before Rino, which meant he couldn't shield her from these things forever. He needed her to get small opportunities to practice, so she could build the skills necessary for overcoming those problems on her own. All he could do was grant her this school, where she could make friends for her long lifetime.

Norman and Tama had no way of knowing Shinichi's true intentions as their fight escalated.

"Shut up, harlot!"

"What?! I'm not a pervy succubus, *meow*!"

"You're always wagging your tail and trying to seduce boys!" Norman reflexively pushed her shoulder away.

She staggered back a step. Her feline eyes flashed as she leaped so high her head almost hit the ceiling.

"No more, *mreow*!"

Sharp claws extended from her right fingertips, slashing down toward Norman's stunned face. They were sharp enough to tear through a human body.

However, the third son of Baron Siamese escaped unscathed. Rino had jumped in front of him, blocking the cat claws with her slender arm.

“…Ah.” Rino winced in pain. She didn’t have enough time to perfect her defensive spell. Blood trickled from her arm, puddling on the floor.

“Lady Rino?! Wh-what have I…?” Tama’s face paled, and her knees gave out.

She was terrified the Demon King would kill her.

However, Rino smiled, ignoring the pain, and took the catgirl’s hand that was stained with her own blood. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stop you sooner.”

“L-listen to yourself! It’s all my fault! You didn’t do anything wrong, *meow*!”

“No. Friends should stop each other from fighting.”

“Friends…?”

Even though they were demon students at the same school, Tama had kept the tiniest bit of distance from Rino. She was the Blue Demon King’s daughter, after all. The catgirl blushed on hearing Rino considered her an equal…and a friend.

When she saw Tama’s tail twitch happily, Rino smiled. She was thinking of a certain woman. “It’s really lonely to not have anyone yank you back on the right path.”

The one who strayed had cried out in hate with her dying breath. For as long as she lived, Rino would never forget the fact that she couldn’t make her smile.

“But I’m really bad at being forceful.”

Wounds to the body could be healed with magic, but wounds to a friend’s heart were different. You couldn’t use *Install* to fix heartbreak.

“I’m sorry for making you hit me. I’m sorry for making you feel bad.” Rino bowed her head.

Tears started to fall from Tama’s eyes. “That’s unfair, *meow*. I can’t be angry if you say it like that, *meow*…”

“I’m sorry.” Rino smiled awkwardly and started to dry Tama’s tears with her handkerchief. After that, she turned around to face Norman.

“I really want you to get along with everybody, but I know that’s impossible.”

“Huh…?” Norman was stupefied, since he expected her to blame him for being the one to start the fight.

Rino looked him square in the face. “I wanted to be friends with Elen—Elazonia—but I couldn’t do it, even though I tried.”

All the human students, including Norman, had watched the entire event unfold.

“Shinichi even said forcing someone to see things from your perspective is worse than being violent.”

“Everyone getting along” sounded good in theory, but was it really worth it to eliminate the uncooperative or brainwash them?

“I really don’t want to put a *Geas* on everyone and make them follow my orders.”

The only option to curb the rabble-rousers was to use mind-control on them, but people had the right to think what they wanted, even the demon-haters.

“I can’t change your mind if you hate us, Norman.”

“No, I don’t—”

“But I don’t think you need to hurt the person you hate,” said Rino sadly. “Elazonia hated the demons and tried to destroy us, and we ended up having to eliminate her.”

That was karma for you. Hatred bred hatred. The shooter shot themselves in the foot.

“I really don’t think it’s good to hurt people.”

Call it self-defense, but the secret of living a long life was to avoid making enemies.

“That’s why it’d be better if you…um…”

“…Had your own space, so you don’t have to fight.”

“Uh-huh—wait. Shinichi?!” Rino jumped to see he had opened the door and entered the classroom.

Shinichi smiled wryly at himself that his overprotective nature had finally won out and made him intrude on their skirmish. He walked over and gently patted Rino’s head.

“You’ve really grown, Rino.”

“Really? Hee-hee.”

Nothing had changed about the sweet way she blushed since the day they'd met. While she may still be innocent, she was starting to take the steps away from being a carefree child into a real-life adult.

I think my concerns were unfounded.

Rino's heart was far stronger than Shinichi had worried it might be.

There's a part of me that's sad to see her so grown. Shinichi turned to Norman, whose face had gone pale at the teachers' arrival.

"Rino's right. We can't change your mind. And we won't attack Boar Kingdom just because you hate us. Don't worry."

"I…"

"Remember to put some distance between you and a nemesis rather than making your disdain known and going on the attack. Especially if you plan to do well in noble society."

"……"

Norman didn't say anything as Shinichi patted his shoulder, trying to cheer him up. He didn't seem too apologetic. Shinichi saw regret and hesitation in him.

His lips curled into a huge grin. "One other thing. If you bully your crush, she's going to hate you."

"What?!" Norman snapped in shock, face turning as red as a tomato.

"I was just joking. Seems I've touched a sore spot," said Shinichi.

"W-w-w-wait! I don't like that catgirl!"

"You've started talking like that masochistic elf."

Any onlooker could tell Norman was lying based on his new stutter.

"Now that you mention it, I remembering hearing the Siamese family loves cats…"

"I heard they have more than ten pet cats."

His fellow students started to testify against him, regarding him coldly.

Tama was dumbfounded for a moment, then blushed, accepting it as the truth.

"I thought something was fishy about you. So you were in heat this whole time, *meow*!"

"I-in heat? Shut up! Nobody has feelings for a pervy catgirl like you!" Norman shouted back, but his eyes followed her every movement—down to the twitching of her ears and tail. It completely destroyed his argument.

"Ummm… Are they living happily ever after?" Rino was confused, unable to keep up with the sudden turn of events.

Shinichi grinned in satisfaction. Ha-ha-ha. A bad situation has turned into a golden opportunity.

He wanted these two together as a symbol of friendship between humans and demons. Who cared if the whole world was against their relationship? He was confident he could convince them by saying that joining families with a demon would mean the Demon King would be their ally.

All the better if he's the third son of a baron. His status isn't too high, and he's not the eldest son. It shouldn't take too much pushing for Boar Kingdom to offer him as a human sacrifice.

Any potential external problems could be easily smoothed out. The largest issue was getting a boy in puberty to admit his feelings despite potential for ridicule.

"I think this calls for drastic measures," Shinichi announced.

"Huh? What are you going to do?" asked Rino doubtfully, but Shinichi didn't answer.

He turned to the closet furry. "Norman, you really don't like Tama, right?"

"Obviously! I won't let anyone get the wrong idea—"

"So you won't mind if I do this?" Shinichi draped his arms around her.

"…Huh?" Norman stood there, still.

"There you go. That's a good girl." He started tickling Tama under her chin, petting her at the base of her tail.

"*Mreow?!* M-Mr. Sotoyama! You shouldn't touch me there, *meow*!"

"But your tail is clearly trying to tell me another story."

"*Mreow!* I'm starting to feel really good, *meow*… ♥ "

"Come on! Let it out! Purr in front of everyone!" Shinichi's hands worked harder, and Tama's eyes narrowed, then the moment she was about to purr—

"Stop!" Norman's face was screwed up in anger as he shoved Shinichi away.

"Agh…" He tumbled to the ground.

"I'm the only one who can pet her!" Norman said defiantly. "…Uh-oh." He gulped. He couldn't take that back.

Released from Shinichi's clutches, Tama blushed a deeper shade of red than when he'd been petting her. Her tail perked up happily.

"I might really go into heat after such a passionate confession, *meow*…"

"N-no, don't misunder—"

"I'll marry you if you become strong enough to beat me, *meow*."

"Really?! I mean, no way!" Norman was still trying to keep up his act as Tama played with him, like a cat with their favorite toy.

Shinichi stood slowly, smiling at the pair. "I'm tired of playing matchmaker."

Arian and Celes came to either side of him and pinned his arms.

"Are you done with your excuses?"

"Shall we have a horse kick him to death?"

They were expressionless as they gripped his arms so tight the bones were close to snapping. There was no need to ask why they were angry.

"As you just witnessed, I was simply trying to spur a young boy into action, since he was having a hard time being honest with his feelings."

"And you think that's a good enough reason to rub a little girl's tail?" Arian asked.

“Public cuckolding? A flea’s life is more precious than yours, dirtbag.”

“No!” Shinichi screeched. “I just rubbed her tailbone, and I’m a fan of doggirls!”

Arian and Celes’s eyes were as cold as if they were looking at a guilty man on death row. There wasn’t an ounce of mercy left in them.

“Tell them, Rino!” Shinichi cried out to his perfect angel to find a way out.

“…I, the Blue Demon King’s daughter, Rinoladell, command you, Shinichi Sotoyama, to swear you will never touch another girl again.”

The light had vanished from her eyes. She smiled like a fallen angel as she mercilessly began to cast *Geas*.

“Rinoooooo?!”

“Hold it,” interjected Sanctina. “I propose we slice off his hands and testicles to prevent him from doing any misdeeds again,” she whispered with an evil smile, like this was the perfect opportunity to eliminate her rival in love.

“Now isn’t time for that, you perv!” Shinichi screamed hysterically.

Celes tightened her grip on his arm. “Accept your fate and allow Lady Rino to cast *Geas* on you.”

“Wait! Who cares about my crimes?! Shouldn’t we be stopping this weird mood that Rino is in?!”

Rino had just been lecturing about how wrong it was to use magic to force people to obey her. There was something off about the fact she was trying to cast *Geas* on Shinichi.

Even though Celes listened to his point, her grip on his arm didn’t loosen at all. “Have you forgotten, Lord Shinichi? Lady Rino is the daughter of *that woman*.”

“Oh…” Shinichi’s heart sank.

The Blue Princess of War, Regina, would choose to die by fire with her lover rather than have him stolen by another woman. That was Rino’s mother.

“Shinichi, promise me with *Geas*. If you don’t… I don’t know what I might do.”

“Eeep! So maybe blood *is* thicker than water!” Shinichi had full-body chills when her angelic smile turned demonic.

“…Rino is the Demon King’s daughter.”

All the students—human and demon—huddled together in the corner of the room while their head teacher screamed in terror. They shuddered at the horrifying scene unfolding in front of them.

Thus, school was canceled that day. Later that night, Shinichi sat at the desk in his room, having somehow recovered from Rino’s punishment. He was in the middle of writing something when he heard someone knock hesitantly at his door.

“Shinichi, can I come in?”

“Uh-huh.” Shinichi set his pencil down and opened the door to see Rino looking dejected.

She bowed so low, she could almost touch her head to her knees. “I’m really sorry about today! When I saw you petting Tama, my heart started to hurt, and I couldn’t control myself…”

“It was partially my fault, too. I’m not angry at you.”

Rino apologized again. Shinichi stroked her hair and calmed her down, then invited her inside for a bit.

At least we succeeded in making her some friends.

By accidentally revealing her darker side, the other children could see she wasn’t some “goddess of eternal love.” She was yet another child who got impulsive and jealous, just like them. It was starting to tear down their walls and prejudices.

Well, it might have made them afraid of her at the same time…

Shinichi smiled wryly, and Rino, who had finally calmed down, turned her eyes to the writing utensils laid out on his desk.

“Are you making a test?”

“No. This isn’t related to teaching.”

He had no reason to hide what he was doing, so he showed the documents to Rino. On them were some words that she felt she’d heard somewhere before and a picture of a long vehicle that stood upright like a tower.

“A spaceship?”

“Bingo. A vehicle that can be used to go on the offensive if another calamity ever comes from the sky again.”

“Oh, I remember!” Rino clapped her hands.

The Red Dragon had shown them how the meteor had decimated the ancient civilization. The head of the Magicology Department had wished for an evacuation plan to go into space. This was the rocket.

“Just because the impossible happened once, doesn’t mean it can’t happen again. I thought I’d leave behind my knowledge about rockets for you in case.”

That said, Shinichi had never properly studied aerospace engineering. He was a high school student who just really liked science. He was using *Search* to pull up any information from special TV programs on space travel or school trips to museums with rockets. There’s no way he could actually draw a design for a spaceship, but he still thought it might be useful to scientists in a couple hundred years as they geared up for space travel.

“I’ve just been thinking I should write down everything I know,” explained Shinichi as he pointed to stacks of paper in the corner of the room.

Even if he had all the knowledge in the world, their technological advancements would never match twenty-first-century Earth, because it would take a long time for society to catch up. He was hoping these would be signposts for future people to reach their goals faster.

“I haven’t been making much progress, though. Preparing for class doesn’t leave me much free time.” Shinichi smiled sadly.

“……” Rino passed the documents back to him, then looked down in silence.

“What’s wrong?”

She slowly raised her head. Her expression was uneasy. Tears were starting to gather in the corners of her eyes.

“Shinichi, you’re not going away, are you?”

“……”

Shinichi couldn’t answer immediately. He knew he would die before Rino, though that wasn’t exactly what Rino was concerned about. He decided to answer truthfully, without making light of it.

“I’ll be with you until the day I die.”

Rino must have sensed the true meaning behind those words.

“…Okay.”

It almost sounded like wedding vows. Instead of making her happy, she looked down again. Tears spilled from her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away and smiled.

“Shinichi, I want to sleep with you!”

“What?!” Shinichi cried.

The conversation was going offtrack like a runaway train. While Shinichi gaped at her, Rino was already quickly crawling into his bed.

“Wait. Hold up. Are you serious?!”

“Yep!” Rino smiled innocently, finding his flustered manner amusing. She suddenly looked at him with a more mature expression. “I understand

we won’t be together forever, even though it’ll be a long time before we part ways.”

“…Ah.”

“I won’t have to be so lonely if we have a baby together!”

“How’d you think of that?!”

Her logic wasn’t exactly wrong, but there was a huge ethical problem.

Oblivious to Shinichi’s shock, Rino patted the bed, inviting him to come over.

“Come on, Shinichi. I want you to make babies with me right now.”

“…Do you even know how babies are made?”

“If a boy and a girl sleep together, a stork will bless them with a baby.”

“You got that right,” lied Shinichi with a perfectly straight face.

This Dirty Advisor wasn’t about to dig his own grave by bringing up the birds and the bees.

“Shinichi, you’re not going to sleep with me…?”

He looked at Rino, who was begging him with wide puppy-dog eyes, let out a heavy sigh, then reluctantly lay down on the bed next to her.

“Seriously, the Demon King would cry if he saw you growing up to become a naughty kid who whines for everything.”

“Hee-hee, I’m a bad girl.” Rino smiled as she snuggled next to him. She really was as sweet as an angel.

Arian and Celes are going to kill me tomorrow morning…

Even though he understood that, he couldn’t bring himself to push away the sweet, young girl. Shinichi put aside his dread and chatted with Rino about nothing in particular until they drifted off to sleep.

A Great Love Story

Though it was almost spring, a thick layer of snow coated the restricted zone in the northernmost point of Uropeh.

On that expanse of pure-white land, starving monsters who had missed their chance to hibernate tried to eat one another. Deep beneath the chaos, one of the Proxies of the Planet—the Red Dragon—slept in a quiet space underground, not even twitching a muscle.

When he felt a familiar magic wave, his eyelids fluttered ever so slightly. A few seconds later, a brilliant light flooded the underground cave, marking the arrival of three human shadows. There was the demon with clear blue hair, the black-haired unabashed outsider, and his own redheaded daughter.

"Dad, I'm sorry it took me so long to come back to thank you."

"……"

His daughter, Arian, bowed her head low, but the Red Dragon kept his eyes closed. He wasn't angry with her.

As the Red Dragon, he would continue to live for billions of years until this planet was annihilated. Four months came nowhere near what he would call a long time. Besides, he already knew through magic that the black-haired outsider had been running around, trying to clean up after the chaos once they'd defeated that ghost. They'd been so busy, they just didn't have time to come.

The Proxy knew they finally came here today because the blue-haired demon had returned from the southern continent where she had been able to meet the White Dragon. With her back, they had someone capable of teleporting them here.

That was why he didn't mind, but he didn't put that into words.

"I'd like to thank you again. Thank you for helping me. I protected the people important to me with your help, Dad." Arian held the dragon sword given to her by the Red Dragon and flashed him a smile so beautiful flowers seemed dull in comparison.

Seeing that face was all he ever needed. Emotion bubbled in his chest, but the awkward father kept quiet.

Arian seemed to sense his feelings, because she didn't complain that he continued to feign sleep. She just looked nervous now that she had finished expressing her gratitude and took another step forward.

"Umm, so about Mom—"

The Red Dragon's heavy jaw moved quickly. *"Teleport."*

Magic enveloped Arian and her companions.

"—Dad, I just want to know!"

Arian rushed to object, but she was too late. Their bodies became light as feathers, whisked away to the Demon King's castle far in the distance.

The Red Dragon sighed heavily, alone once again. "…Tired."

He couldn’t imagine telling his daughter about how he met her mother.

The Red Dragon fell asleep again, refusing to reveal the mystery.

The village of beast morphs, Mouse, was built in the deep valley in the middle of the restricted zone. A boisterous laugh rang out from one of the cave-like homes.

“Ah-ha-ha! Can’t expect much else, can ya?”

Shinichi had just finished telling the hardy elderly man, the village chief, about what had happened.

He laughed, trying to defend the Red Dragon. “I’d be embarrassed, too. Hell, I haven’t even told my sons how me and the missus fell in love, not even after she passed.”

“Really?” Arian creased her brow.

Regina, the Blue Princess of War, chuckled. “Ha-ha-ha. Boys tend to be shyer about these things. Something about how these matters can’t be discussed lightly.”

“But the Demon King talks very proudly about when you met,” Arian pointed out.

“Well, he’s a worthless husband.” Regina acted fed up, but she was beaming.

Shinichi looked like this was sickly sweet. “Yeah, yeah. I never know what to do when he talks about how you two beat the crap out of each other.”

They tried so hard to kill each other, they’d turned an entire mountain range into flatlands. In the end, that’s what made them fall in love with each other. If the Demon King acted all shy when he recounted the story…what would be the appropriate response?

“Anyway, if he’s embarrassed, it might mean there’s some bittersweet memories there,” said Shinichi.

“That’s what I think…” Arian’s expression didn’t change.

Her father was a kind soul, gentle enough to help them, so she didn’t think he would have forced himself on her mother. But what had her mother been thinking when she was with the Red Dragon and gave birth to a half dragon? They had no clues to work from, and she couldn’t even imagine the answers, which really bothered her.

“Chief, did my mom tell you much about my dad?”

“No… Brigit didn’t talk about herself all that much…” He looked troubled by Arian’s question, but tried to remember what had happened seventeen years ago. “I remember we had this strange lot come into the restricted zone. It happened on a few occasions—a rarity.”

“What strange lot?”

“A goofy crew that could look unfazed even if they got eaten by a monster.”

“Ah, the Goddess’s heroes.”

Arian had told them stories about heroes who’d crossed the Matteral Mountains to test their skills and were immediately killed by monsters. Besides, no normal person would set foot into the restricted zone—it’d be suicide, considering how many monsters ran wild here.

“…Wait. Does that mean that Arian’s mom was a hero?” asked Shinichi.

“Uh, there’s no way!” Arian said, loudly. “Mom despised the church!”

Her mother had refused to get healed by the church through their entire nomadic journey, even when she was at death’s door.

“But she couldn’t have been a hero…,” Arian murmured, unable to believe it, but there was a hint of uncertainty in her eyes.

Could she have hated the church so much *because* she had been a hero?

I sort of saw this coming, thought Shinichi, looking at Arian, even more certain about his guess. Well, they had no real proof. He got back to what the chief was saying.

“So Arian’s mom was hunting monsters in the restricted zone?”

“Yep. We just watched her from a ways off, ’cause we knew we wouldn’t survive if we got attacked.”

The beast morphs were the only living remains of the city of Mouse that was destroyed by the Goddess’s church. If heroes discovered their presence, they would certainly come and attack.

“We watched her fighting monsters for a while, but at some point, she just disappeared for a bit,” continued the chief.

“I bet she was getting comfy with the Red Dragon then,” explained Regina.

“Yeah, but would it kill you to be less explicit?” Shinichi snapped. Arian’s cheeks turned red.

“After a few months, the monsters seemed worked up, so we went to go see and saw Brigit fighting them all alone.”

Waves of monsters were going after her while she mowed down the trees of the forest. The scene was so horrific, even the beast morphs prepared themselves for death, but Brigit stood fast against them and eventually killed every last one of the monsters with the swing of her sword.

“Not bad! I really do wish I could’ve fought with her once,” said Regina, truly impressed.

“Are you sure she’s human?” Shinichi’s mouth was slack in amazement.

Even the chief smiled awkwardly as he remembered what he saw that day.

“I hate to say it, but she seemed more like some monster than us… Anyway, we stood there, wondering what we should do, and she eventually collapsed from exhaustion.”

They had rushed over and surrounded the unconscious woman, then discussed their next steps.

“If we keep this woman alive, she might kill us someday—or come back with that strange group from before. It’s better for us to finish her off here.”

That had been their consensus, but they were stopped when they tried to raise their iron spears against her.

“My missus suddenly said, ‘This woman’s pregnant. We can’t kill her. We need to take her back to the village.’”

The others objected, but the village chief’s wife was quite the warrior, so she shut them up with her fists and lugged Brigit back to the village herself.

“We owe our lives to your wife…,” said Arian, shoulders slumping. She wished she could have met her once and said thank you.

The chief smiled happily and patted her shoulder to comfort her. “I’m sure she’s in the next world, smiling down on you.”

“What happened when you got back to the village?” asked Shinichi to keep the story moving.

The chief nodded. “My missus explained everything about us and our village to Brigit when she woke up. When she was done, Brigit knelt, bowed till her head touched the floor, which made us feel bad, and begged us to let her stay in the village until the baby was born.”

At first, many of the villagers were opposed, but they immediately changed their minds once they learned of the father of the child.

“I mean, she said it was the Red Dragon! We were all gobsmacked!”

Until recently, the chief himself had never even seen the Red Dragon in person, but there had been rumors that he had been in the restricted zone even before the city of Mouse had been destroyed.

“There’s a lot of folks who worship the Red Dragon, saying beast morphs are born under his protection,” continued the chief.

“So you do know where you come from,” said Shinichi.

The massive magic waves from the dragon made the magic system in their bodies develop rapidly. Even if they weren’t aware of that logic, they seemed to intuitively guess that was the case. That had been why Elazonia had obliterated the whole city: to prevent any more beast morphs—demons by another name—from being born.

“Anyway, we wouldn’t know if Brigit was lying until the baby was born, so we decided we couldn’t kill her right away.”

Thus began Brigit’s life in Mouse Village.

She had never been one to mock the beast morphs for their looks. In fact, she went so far as to apologize for the Goddess’s heroes who invaded the restricted zone and volunteered to hunt for monsters of her own volition, even though she was pregnant. As she helped with village work, the people slowly began to come around, warming up to her.

“Eventually, Arian was born. The scales on her neck were a sure sign that she was the Red Dragon’s daughter. Everyone was so happy. I thought she’d stay and live with us forever, but…”

After Arian turned two, happily toddling around, Brigit suddenly said they’d be leaving the village and returning to human society.

“Why? It’s much more fun in Mouse. Monsters never show up in human villages,” said Regina.

“I don’t think that’s a positive thing…,” said Arian with a wry smile. “Things would have been a lot easier if we’d stayed in this village…”

They’d had to keep moving around to hide the fact that Arian was a half dragon. They could never settle in one place. She couldn’t make close friends. She had really been tested. If she had lived with the beast morphs in Mouse Village, she would never have experienced those hardships.

“I am grateful, though, since it meant I eventually met Shinichi,” added Arian.

“Heh-heh-heh, pleasure’s all mine,” said Shinichi, cackling to hide his embarrassment as Arian blushed and took his hand.

If they had stayed in Mouse Village…

Shinichi tried to imagine it. He was doubtful things would have worked out so well. The reason Arian hadn’t been able to access her true powers until recently was because she felt she was different from other people. She had the blood of a dragon flowing through her veins. The church hated the dragons, which made her feel inferior.

If she had grown up in Mouse Village, she would never have had that feeling of inferiority. In fact, she would have been practically worshipped for being the daughter of the Red Dragon, and she would have had access to her true strength very quickly.

If she had grown up freely wielding her power, which was enough to threaten Elazonia, neither the villagers nor her mother would have been able to keep her in check.

What would happen to a girl with far too much power and no one to stop her? That was obvious.

Too much self-confidence can make someone narcissistic. An appropriate amount of insecurity can become humility. I’m not sure her mom thought that far ahead, though…

He knew he wasn’t going to find an answer on his own, so Shinichi turned to the village chief. “What did Arian’s mom have to say about it?”

“I think it was something like ‘I know I’m being selfish as a parent, but I want her to see the world with her own eyes.’”

“She wanted me to see the world, huh…?”

“And she added, ‘Since I couldn’t see anything…’”

The villagers hadn’t been able to stop her when they saw her pained face as she carried Arian away.

“That’s ’bout all I know. The missus was the closest with her. Brigit might have told her more, but…”

“It’s so unfortunate she’s passed…”

Shinichi and the chief let out a heavy sigh.

“What’s our next move, then?” asked Regina. “The Red Dragon won’t talk, and I can’t think of any other leads.”

“……” Arian was silent.

Shinichi looked at her, his expression very serious. “Arian, are you sure you want to know everything about your mom?”

If Brigit had been unable to tell her daughter even on her deathbed, it might have been because she didn't want Arian to know certain things.

"It's possible she's hidden it for your sake," he added.

Even if that weren't the case, exposing the secrets someone took to their grave was about as disrespectful as digging their body out of the ground.

"The dead can't get angry or seek revenge, but the living might be wracked with guilt. Are you sure you want to know?"

"……" Arian thought in silence for a moment. After that, she smiled like a child who'd been caught in a prank. "To be honest, I really just want to know as a reference."

"A reference?"

"I mean, my children will have dragon blood. I want to learn from Mom, since she's already been through all the pain of raising me."

"Uh, oh…" Shinichi became flustered when she looked up at him with gentle eyes and blushing cheeks.

"A quarter dragon, huh? I'm curious what kind of children they'll be, future groom," teased Regina, grinning widely.

"…So you still want to know?" asked Shinichi, completely ignoring the Blue Princess of War.

Arian nodded, like she was casting aside any doubt. "I want to know about Mom. I want to be able to be proud to say I'm her daughter, like I'm proud to be Dad's."

Why did she hate the church? Why did she refuse to heal herself even when she was sick? And why did she force herself into a life of solitude? She must have been a hero, but had a child with the Red Dragon, an enemy of the church. Why would she insist on raising that child, even though she knew she would be ridiculed by the people around her?

Arian would rather face the truth directly and have to deal with the consequences if the alternative was to continue to have these nagging questions and feel displeased by her mother until she ended up hating her.

Shinichi looked at Arian and grinned broadly. "All right, let's dig up the happy and embarrassing story of the Red Dragon's romantic rendezvous!"

"Yeah!"

"Seems like you have a plan," observed Regina, jumping to her feet with Shinichi and Arian and looking just as excited.

"We'll be heading out now. Make sure you think about what I said earlier," said Shinichi.

"You mean 'bout sending the youngins to school?"

"Uh-huh. Just the ones who are interested. I don't want to force anyone to come."

"Psssh. The youngins are interested in the world outside the village. I'm more worried they'll leave in droves."

"Ha-ha-ha. In any world, the boonies always end up with shrinking populations." Shinichi laughed and finished his good-byes with the chief,

then turned to tell Regina where they were going. “Can you *Teleport* us to the demon world?”

“The demon world?”

“That’s where we’ll find someone who knows everything, just like the Red Dragon.”

“You can’t mean…?” Regina guessed what he was getting at, and her face went pale, but Shinichi said the name like it was nothing.

“We’re going to get the scoop from your ‘sun’—the Blue Dragon.”

The blue sun in the sky never sank in the demon world. Instead, it continued to hang there, slowly dimming and illuminating in twenty-four-hour cycles. To those who had grown up on the surface, it was hard to get used to this sight.

“It’s like a heartbeat,” noted Shinichi.

“A heart that only beats once a day. Any creature would die,” said Arian.

“The bigger the animal, the slower its heartbeat. It’s not impossible with a heart that massive.”

Shinichi and Arian chatted idly while Regina used *Fly* to take them all up to the sun, now that it was night and it had stopped shining.

“It looks even bigger up close,” cried Shinichi.

The sphere was at least a third of a mile in diameter. The fact that it continued to float in the air despite gravity was testament enough to the Blue Dragon’s power.

The three were awed as they approached the sun. “Do you really intend to speak with the Blue Dragon?” Regina asked uncertainly.

“Is that cheeky of me?”

“Obviously! This is the god that saved the demons. Even I would be more reverent!”

He’d never seen her so flustered before; she was usually so confident. Shinichi just couldn’t hold back.

“Ha-ha-ha, I wish Celes could see you right about now.”

“Asshole. If Celes were here, she would have beaten you to a pulp for being so disrespectful.”

Regina raised her voice, claiming even the Demon King would have refused to come—with some excuse about how he couldn’t show his face because he wasn’t even stronger than Elazonia.

Shinichi didn’t care. “If your god is merciful, they should be happy to answer our questions. I mean, wasn’t the White Dragon in the south quite the gentleman?”

“Well yeah, but…” She faltered, remembering her encounter from a few days before.

Nothing had changed since the ancient civilization. The White Dragon still slumbered, scales shining like pearls, in the middle of a deadly desert ravaged by monsters and sandstorms.

And he had kindly greeted Regina, his first visitor in thousands of years.

“Speak, brave one. What is it you seek?”

Regina already knew what she wanted. “I ask that you stand against me in a battle!”

As soon as she blurted that out, she cast the most powerful spell in her arsenal: *False Dragon Breath*. There was a burning flash so hot it evaporated the white-hot desert sand.

However, even with a direct hit, the White Dragon didn’t sustain a single injury. His eyes narrowed as if in amusement, and he gave Regina one of his white scales as proof of her efforts before teleporting her exhausted body back to the Demon King’s castle.

“I’d say the White Dragon likes powerful people who pave their way to him,” said Shinichi.

“Mm, I had a feeling he was cut from the same cloth.”

“The Red Dragon is a man of few words who loves his daughter. The Black Dragon is a lazy creature who just wants to keep sleeping. All of them are pretty harmless.”

Which was why it was hard to imagine their lives would be at risk even if they tried to talk to the Blue Dragon.

“I think the dragons would only become violent against someone powerful enough to destroy the planet. We’re not *that* strong.”

“I hate to admit you’re right.” Regina accepted Shinichi’s argument and lowered them onto the sun’s surface.

Looking at it up close, it appeared to be made of some glass-like, translucent substance. It was cool to the touch—hard to imagine it had just been shining.

Shinichi was curious about the mysterious material, but he focused on the matter at hand to greet the Proxy.

“Hello, Blue Dragon. We have come to visit because we wish to ask you something.”

He didn’t know what kind of being they were dealing with, so he opted for a formal greeting, but all he received was silence.

“…No reply. It’s just a corpse.”

“Don’t say something so ominous!” snapped Regina.

“Maybe it’s just sleeping?”

Suddenly, the voice of a young woman rang in their minds.

“Congratulations! You are the first customers to visit since the grand opening of our underground branch!”

“……”

“Hmm? Did my joke flop? Tee-hee! ♪ ”

They were almost too shocked for words.

“Um, are you the Blue Dragon?” Shinichi managed.

“Uh-huh! I’m Blue, OG superstar keeping the demon world shining bright! ♥ ”

The mental image of a beautiful woman striking a pose made Shinichi so dizzy he fell to his knees.

“This…is…their…god…?”

“……”

“Regina! Stay with us!” Arian violently shook the Blue Princess of War, as her eyes rolled back into her head.

The Blue Dragon laughed in amusement at the sight of the three of them.

“Tee-hee-hee! I’m glad I made the demon world if it meant seeing the looks on your faces! Totally worth it!”

“Her personality is just terrible…” Shinichi cradled his head in his hands again. The Blue Dragon was the polar opposite of Arian’s silent father.

The woman replied like she hadn’t expected such a response.

“Hey! Says the one who exposed Ellie’s secrets to the entire continent!”

“You saw that?”

“Of course. There’s no way I was going to miss a show that good. I’m so glad I saved the demons and humans.”

“……”

“Well, actually, I only saved the demons who escaped underground. Greenie was the one who helped the humans who stayed on the surface. She’s a bit of an animal collector, you see. She kept her ‘holy garden’ warm

enough to preserve the ecosystem during the ice age caused by the meteor."

"Greenie…? You mean the Green Dragon?"

"Don't get the wrong idea, though. She only protected humans because they're just another animal. She actually hates you guys, since you have the potential to destroy all the other wildlife. Especially you. You would never be allowed to enter her garden. ♪ "

"Sounds like a science-hating tree hugger."

"Well, she's a recluse who only cares about keeping her garden safe. She's harmless as long as you're not stupid and don't try to mess with her."

The Blue Dragon was very casual about letting such important information slip. Shinichi filed that information away, feeling cold sweat running down his spine.

"She must be—," Shinichi thought.

"Bull's-eye! You're so smart. ♪ " The Blue Dragon guessed what Shinichi was thinking and laughed in amusement.

"Huh? What bull's-eye?" Arian didn't know what they were talking about.

Shinichi explained with a pained expression. "I'd always wondered: If the Proxies only exist because the planet is here…then why did one of the dragons save the humans?"

The Blue Dragon had led a group of demons into the hole that the Black Dragon had dug, allowing them to escape the impact of the meteorite.

The professor of the Magicology Department had posed the same question: Why would a dragon go out of her way to save them? The humans and demons were as parasitic and pesky as an unwanted hair on your chin. But their answers were similar to the Green Dragon's, since they all shared the same hobby.

"The answer was: because they're fun to watch."

"…What?"

"Ding-ding-ding! The outsider wins a hundred million points!"

While the Blue Dragon was bursting with excitement, Arian was the exact opposite, frozen in place from surprise.

Regina finally regained her senses. "You saved us for your own entertainment?"

"Yeah, it must be like admiring a garden," said Shinichi. But unlike with man-made flower beds, the goal wasn't to look at beautiful flowers. "She likes to people-watch—humans alive and dead, in love and in a murderous rage. All of it."

Fact wasn't as strange as fiction, but there was no plot as varied as the lives of human beings. There was no show more riveting to a demigod with a near infinite life span.

"So she saved the demons to keep herself from getting bored."

"*Basically. You don't have to thank me for it or anything*," said the Blue Dragon lightly to Regina, whose jaw was still slack. But that didn't reduce

how much the demons worshipped the god who had saved them, nor did it ease any of the pain in Regina's heart.

"I can never tell my husband or Rino about this…"

"It can be our little secret. ♪ "

It was like the Blue Dragon knew they could handle the truth, but Regina wasn't sure if she should be happy about that. Shinichi sighed again, seeing that the Blue Dragon was horrible enough to even enjoy toying with Regina.

"I'm starting to see Arian's dad as a respectable person…," said Shinichi.

"How dare you?! I can't believe you would think I'm worse than some deadbeat dad!"

"Hmph…" Arian pouted when the Blue Dragon talked bad about her father, even though Shinichi had once pointed out the same simple truth.

The Blue Dragon scrambled to amend her statement. "I'm just joking! How about this? I'll listen to anything you tell me as my way of apologizing, okay?"

"Anything?" Shinichi stressed.

"Tee-hee! You're so naughty, wanting to make love with me! ♥ "

"…Shinichi?" asked Arian.

"Wait! I'm not exactly into having sex with gigantic spheres!" Shinichi shouted, since she was taking this so seriously.

Just then, a beautiful blue-haired woman sprang from the ground.

"Do you still not want to make love with me?"

"I will have to politely decline your offer," Shinichi immediately said.

Any form of lust was outweighed by an impending sense of doom, though this was virtually a male fantasy come to life.

Even if Arian weren't next to him looking so upset, he would have had to pass. The thought of sleeping with such a trickster was far too scary.

"Anyway, it looks like you can take human form," offered Shinichi.

He knew she'd assumed this shape when she'd led the demons in their escape to the underground. He figured the Red Dragon had turned into a human, considering he'd made a child with Brigit. But seeing it in front of his eyes left him unable to hide his surprise.

"It's not like my real form is as the sun or a dragon. ♪ " The Blue Dragon winked, making Shinichi nauseous and squashing any desire he had of asking her for more details.

I bet they don't even have a true form.

A Proxy of the Planet didn't necessarily need a specific shape. If they were there to kill any enemy who tried to destroy the planet, they could be a shapeless slime as long as they could generate massive amounts of magic.

Did they take the form of a dragon because it seemed appropriately strong…? I wonder which of these things came first…

Did humans start calling giant winged lizards dragons because the Proxies took that form? Or did the Proxies take that form because the humans had imagined that a creature like that would be so powerful it could kill even a god?

Shinichi eyed the Blue Dragon suspiciously, but she didn't answer his questions. She just smiled back at him.

"As an apology for my little slip earlier—and because I really enjoyed watching your fight against Ellie—I'll listen to pretty much any request, though I can't help you with everything."

"We appreciate it." Shinichi felt like he dodged a bullet, shoving Arian in front of him.

She readied herself. "Please tell me what my mom was thinking when she got together with my dad. How did she get involved with him? How did I end up being born?"

"Sure, sure. I can fill you in!" The Blue Dragon had known that question was coming since she'd been watching them. She didn't look surprised—more like amused—and cast some spells without a moment's hesitation. "*Link* and *Search*."

They'd experienced this before with the Red Dragon. Their senses were linked with the Blue Dragon's consciousness, flooding their brains with information stored in the planet.

"Agh. It's still painful the second time around…"

Shinichi, Arian, and Regina clasped hands with one another and desperately braced themselves so they wouldn't lose their own minds in the deluge of information.

They saw the images of a swordswoman warding off monsters in a restricted zone. She swung a thick great sword in her hand—the palm emblazoned with the Goddess's symbol. She looked like the mother that Arian knew, and at the same time, she looked nothing like her. But there was no mistaking that chestnut hair, those sharp blue eyes, and the angular facial features.

"Mom…" Arian tried to hold back her tears at the sight of her mother, Brigit the Hero.

"Hsssssssssss—!"

A sixty-foot snake opened its mouth and came at Brigit, trying to swallow her whole. She wasn't intimidated at all, swinging her great sword directly in front of her.

"Hi-yah!"

Her muscular body had been trained over a long period of time and further strengthened by *Physical Enchantment*. The single slash was almost supersonic, tearing the snake from its head all the way down its body. A moment later, the shockwave blasted into the two halves of the snake, blowing them away in a rain of fresh blood. Brigit quickly dodged the blood and sinew, gazing cautiously at the remains of the gigantic snake that had crashed to the ground.

"……"

It was surprisingly difficult for animals to die, twitching for seconds, even without a functioning head or heart.

Monsters were even worse. It wasn't uncommon for a person to lose their life when they got caught up in a monster's death throes. On top of that, some of them had more than one brain or heart, which meant they didn't die even when you'd supposedly defeated them. Luckily, the giant snake didn't move a single inch, and Brigit slowly lowered her great sword.

Suddenly, she twirled around and lashed out with a horizontal slash. There was nothing there. Or it looked like there was nothing there, but she could feel her sword cutting through flesh. There was a spray of blood and a thud as something heavy fell to the ground—the corpse of a lizard with a particularly large head and eyes. It was a chameleon turned into a monster.

"…Phew."

Brigit searched the vicinity for signs of anything else, but it seemed this time there really weren't any more monsters. She finally let out a sigh of relief.

"They just keep coming."

Each monster had morphed into a different form, meaning they came to attack with a variety of methods. Brigit muttered resentfully as she used *Purification* to clean the blood from her great sword, then left the area before more monsters could fight her.

"It's like hell out here."

Brigit looked around the forest but couldn't locate a single normal animal. Not one normal field mouse or sparrow. Quite the contrary. Here, even the grass and trees were twisted into unpleasant shapes. There were even some carnivorous plants that could move.

North from the Mouse Labor Camp and across the Matteral Mountains was this restricted zone. The deeper parts had more monsters and less normal wildlife. In the deepest reaches that Brigit was in now, all you saw were beasts everywhere.

"Impurities must be cleansed at any cost."

She couldn't ignore the damage that these monsters caused when they occasionally crossed the mountains and made their way to human civilization. More importantly, she simply couldn't allow these abominations against nature to exist.

"As is Lady Elazonia's will," said Brigit proudly as she looked at the hero symbol on her right hand.

Evil monsters rampaged across the restricted zone, but in the end, their total numbers weren't all that great. Monsters had to eat hundreds of pounds of food every day to maintain their massive bodies, and the forest's bounty was limited. Once they finished with the nuts, fruit, and normal animals, their only option was to prey on one another. This kept their population in check.

"Even if there are ten thousand monsters, they wouldn't be impossible to exterminate."

If there were that many monsters, they had the potential of killing millions of normal soldiers. But the church had the immortal heroes. If they continued to fight without giving in, they would annihilate the monsters eventually.

Brigit truly believed that, and that's why she brushed off the people who tried to stop her from going to the restricted zone. She hadn't been surrounded by a large group of monsters, but she did lose a few fights in the beginning. Now she'd adapted completely and had already slaughtered more than three hundred of the fiendish creatures. She had believed that if things continued like this, this land might be returned to human hands someday…but lately, she was starting to feel doubtful.

"I knew it. It doesn't seem like their population is getting any smaller."

Though her kills had only been about 3 percent of the total population, she had been making progress. Even though the impact to the restricted zone was small, it would make sense for there to be fewer monsters on her morning route into the forest. But nothing had changed.

"It feels like their numbers are increasing."

There was nothing inherently strange about that situation. Monsters came from existing wildlife exposed to large amounts of magic, causing them to morph. They would continue to appear unless all plants and animals were eliminated from the world. However, the rate at which monsters occurred naturally was incredibly low.

During the approximately three hundred years the church had been going around slaying monsters, they had kept detailed records about what kind of beasts infested which locations. Based on that information, it was possible to calculate the average rate of a monster appearing at one per year in locations with ecosystems larger than a few hundred thousand animals.

So monsters normally appeared at a rate of one in hundreds of thousands, yet they somehow filled this restricted zone as if infinitely respawning. In other words, the only logical conclusion was that there was something unnatural creating them.

"And there's no way it's a human."

There was a story of an evil magic user who conducted experiments where they continued to cast spells on a mouse until it evolved into a monster. That magic user was executed by the church, and all their research data was destroyed, meaning none of the details remained.

However, it was evident that monsters could be artificially produced. Except this wasn't a single little mouse—it was ten thousand massive monsters. The magic necessary to create them was beyond anything a human could produce. Which meant…

"The Evil God must be here."

In the age of legends, the Goddess Elazonia defeated and sealed the Evil God deep in the underground pits. Maybe the Evil God was creating

monsters to wreak havoc on the world, since they couldn't act on their own. She couldn't think of any other explanation that made sense.

"It would also explain why His Holiness the pope seems afraid of the restricted zone, saying it's a cursed land that no one should ever set foot in."

Other than Cemetarium Forest, which was controlled by elves, the church had control over pretty much the entire continent. No one would ever go against the church, yet the pope had never ordered the cleansing of the restricted zone. It had always bothered Brigit, but it made sense if it was because of some connection to the Evil God.

"If His Holiness can't do it, I will." Brigit gripped the hilt of her great sword and smiled.

She wasn't very good at *Healing* or *Resurrection* spells, so she was never able to become a priest, but her capacity for magic went beyond that of a cardinal or pope, even Vermeita, the leading candidate to be the next cardinal, who was called the Holy Mother despite her young age. Even she wouldn't be able to win against Brigit in a close-combat fight. Since she started hunting in the restricted zone, she'd been able to work on her skills even more. It was safe to assume no human could win against her now.

"My Lady Elazonia! I promise to defeat the Evil God and release the restricted zone from its curse!" shouted Brigit to the heavens. Then she continued to walk farther into the forest.

There was no one closer to being a true hero of the Goddess than her. The entity responsible for all these monsters was indeed one of Elazonia's hated enemies. But could it really be called courage if someone was blinded by faith and was reckless because they had a cushion of immortality? There wasn't a single person to ask Brigit that question.

"That's…my mom?" Arian was stunned, almost unable to believe what she'd seen.

The mother she remembered was a kind, gentle person who avoided fighting with others. Nothing about her resembled this zealous warrior who giddily slayed monsters.

"To think she worshipped Elazonia that much…"

Arian wavered on her feet, more shocked about that than by the fact that her mom was a hero. Shinichi quickly caught her in his arms.

It makes sense. I can understand why her mom would want to hide this from her.

Brigit herself would have considered it a dark part of her own history, considering how much she hated the church in her final years. Shinichi felt guilty again for exposing these secrets, but the Blue Princess of War's eyes were sparkling in excitement.

“Hah, she’s such an incredible swordswoman. I never would have imagined she’s human. There aren’t even many like her among the demons,” she said.

“She leaves carnage everywhere around her,” agreed Shinichi.

Brigit was always a skilled swordswoman, but the time in the restricted zone, bathed in the Red Dragon’s magic waves, must have pushed her to even greater heights.

“Maybe even as strong as human Elazonia, though she fought with magic, not swords,” Shinichi assessed.

“Uh-huh. She reached the upper limit of human capacity,” said the Blue Dragon, confirming his thoughts.

Shinichi stroked his chin. “I can’t completely abandon the idea of training humans using “the dragons’ magic waves. I wonder if there’s a way to prevent them from turning into demons…”

“I don’t think it’s possible. Well, maybe if you take your time. But only natural-born geniuses would be able to keep their human form. Sanctie might be the only one currently,” said the dragon.

“I see… Am I okay?!” Shinichi suddenly realized he was in acute danger and shuddered.

His magic ability was below average, though he had some fancy spells founded on science. He frantically patted his body to check he wasn’t sprouting animal ears or scales.

The Blue Dragon giggled at him. “You should be fine if it’s only a couple of hours. But if you stay here for days, you’ll end up a demon! ♪ ”

“I never thought it could happen to me… Well, it wouldn’t be that much of a issue if I turned into a demon now,” he said flippantly. “I’d like to see more… Is that all right?”

He looked at Arian, who was still in his arms. She seemed upset, but nodded anyway. “Please show us some more. How did she turn into the mom I knew?”

“Here we go!” The Blue Dragon snapped her fingers, letting the paused memories of the past start again.

Brigit had arrived at the foothills of the mountain under which the Red Dragon slept.

“This has to be the place.”

Brigit looked up at the tallest mountain in the restricted zone with sharp eyes. She’d spent days searching the territory and had finally sniffed out the magic source she believed to be creating the monsters.

“It’s in there… No, below there.”

Brigit stood at the base of the mountain, feeling the powerful flow of magic and glaring down below the sloped ground.

“There’s no way in.”

She tried climbing up to the peak for a bit to investigate, to no avail. No caves seemed to continue to below the mountain.

"If only I could *Teleport*…"

She sighed. Advanced spells were nothing more than a pipe dream for Brigit. She must have lacked the imagination necessary to cast them.

"I have no reason to hurry now. We'll do this slow and steady."

Brigit returned to the base of the mountain, placed her hands on the ground, and cast a spell.

"Mother of all lands and seas, grant me a path forward, *Tunnel*."

He magic blasted out of her palms, burrowing into the earth to create a hole. It was only about ten feet long and so narrow that only one person could barely squeeze through, but that didn't seem to bother Brigit. She just continued to cast the same spell.

"Tunnel, Tunnel, Tunnel…"

If she ran out of magic, she slept in there. She left the hole to eat and go to the bathroom, but then she'd go back and keep tunneling. The work continued for ten days until it suddenly connected with a massive underground space.

"…It's here."

Brigit felt the terrific magic waves and gripped her great sword tightly; she cast a *Light* spell and dashed into the space. She was in awe of the bright-red body suddenly coming into view.

"A red dragon…"

It was completely different from the Black Dragon of the church's legends, the servant of the Evil God. This one had scales so red they looked like they were on fire. It slept, its huge eyes closed, but she still felt its intelligence when she looked at its face.

But it was still a dragon. This was one of the beasts that had devoured masses of people and destroyed civilizations in times past. It continued to create monsters even now, making it the mortal enemy of the Goddess Elazonia and all of humanity.

"Hi-yaaaah!"

Her wonder only lasted a second. Brigit let out a terrifying battle cry and lunged at the Red Dragon. Her great sword had been boosted with *Protection*, making it harder than diamonds. She swung it down at the dragon faster than the speed of sound. It was a strike sure to kill any monster with a single blow, but the great sword bounced back, sending pins and needles up her arm.

"Argh!" Brigit gritted her teeth and looked at the dragon's neck, where not even a scratch could be seen. She didn't give up, though. She stood and continued to attack.

"Haaah! Hi-yaaaah!"

She thrust at vital points—its forehead and eyes—slashing at its scaleless belly, but even so, the Red Dragon continued to sleep quietly without a single wound.

“This is the true strength of an evil dragon…”

Brigit fell to her knees, her breath ragged. She stopped her thousandth sure-to-be ineffective swing.

But she wasn’t about to give up there. If she was one to throw in the towel, she would never have made it through the cursed restricted zone to the Red Dragon’s lair in the first place.

“I *will* kill you.”

Brigit gritted her teeth in frustration but walked away from the Red Dragon, sat down with her back against the stone wall, and closed her eyes.

That was the beginning of her days spent attacking the creature.

When she opened her eyes again, she lifted her great sword, slashed at the dragon until her strength failed her, then passed out into sleep. She only stopped swinging her sword and left the dark underground space to go out into the sun when she needed to find food and water. She looked like some hermit who had withdrawn to the wilds for intensive training.

To tell the truth, the two months that Brigit continued to challenge the Red Dragon had cooled her once-burning faith in Elazonia.

“Why won’t you kill me?”

Brigit stopped in the middle of her nth slash—she’d lost count—and quietly asked that question. She understood she was entirely unable to inflict any wound on the Red Dragon, and so it would have no reason to bother killing her. But even so, she was like an annoying fly buzzing around its head. There was no reason to let her keep living, either. Yet the Red Dragon continued to let her be, remaining completely silent.

“Are you really an evil dragon?” she asked, already certain that was wrong. This Red Dragon was obviously the source of large numbers of monsters. However, there was no grand scheme or evil intent here. Just like it had continued to ignore her, the Red Dragon seemed completely indifferent to everything that happened in this world. She couldn’t believe that something like this would be the servant of the Evil God or destroy humanity.

“Who are you?”

The Red Dragon didn’t answer her question. Not that she expected him to. She just sat down, leaned against the massive red form, and turned her question inward.

“Who am I?”

She was so tired her mind wasn’t working properly, and she felt like she was half dreaming as she looked back on her own life.

When she was a little girl, she was better than anyone else. She could run fast enough to keep up with dogs, and she was strong enough to send a keg of ale flying. Rumors started to spread that she was a child prodigy not even adults could keep up with. A priest in the city caught wind of this and came to see her.

He inspected Brigit's body and grinned broadly. "This child has incredible potential for magic. Would you please allow us, the church, to take her?"

Brigit's parents jumped on the offer and sold their daughter for a hefty sum of money. It was understandable. They were nothing more than a poor farming family, and they had four other mouths to feed.

But Brigit knew the truth. Her parents hadn't done it for the money. They'd done it to get away from their superhuman daughter. When they looked at her, their daughter, being led away by the priest, there hadn't been a single tear in their eyes. In fact, they'd looked relieved. That was the moment she decided she would believe only in the Goddess Elazonia and keep getting stronger.

"It was fun to train."

The priest who had taken Brigit in was a man in his late thirties called Cronklum. Later, he would become known as the Elderly Cardinal, but at the time, he was still nothing more than a gifted bishop. Brigit trained alongside other potential heroes under the tutelage of Cronklum, a powerful magic user himself. That was a very fulfilling time for Brigit. She'd never met anyone equal to her before.

But that didn't last long. She wasn't very good at healing magic, and she only ever made progress in strengthening her body and using her sword. Soon, even an adult priest couldn't keep up with her, let alone her fellow potential heroes. When Brigit was thirteen and more powerful than even Cronklum could handle, he took her to the Archbasilica. She stood in front of the statue carved by the first pope and received the symbol of the hero.

"I liked to fight, too."

She spent her days as a young hero slaying monsters. Since battle was her one forte, it was the only job where she felt useful to people. Her work saved many, bolstering the success of her adoptive father, Cronklum, and spreading Elazonia's influence throughout the world. It was wonderful. That's why she believed in the Goddess without thinking about it, continued to kill monsters, and moved forward—ever forward.

"I never thought about who I was."

She enjoyed the consecutive battles. She'd had no time to stop and think.

That wasn't true. She never stopped because she was afraid. She had no companions standing beside her and no family supporting her from behind. If she had thought about it, she probably would have realized just how alone she was. That's why she continued to redirect her focus to the enemies that stood in front of her.

As a result, she ended up hunting all the monsters who roamed the fields. The only worthy enemies remaining were the elves in the east or the monsters in the restricted zone. Brigit believed killing monsters was more in line with Goddess Elazonia's message, so she'd decided to try her hand at

the latter. Then she ran into the massive obstacle—the Red Dragon—and just sat with herself for the first time.

"Who am I?" asked Brigit as she looked up at the dragon's face.

She was shocked to see its eyes open. No amount of swings from her sword had elicited a response, but now its heavy lids were open and its golden eyes stared straight at her.

""……""

They looked at each other in silence, forgetting to blink. Brigit wasn't about to stoop so low as to go for the dragon's eyes now that the vital points were exposed. She just looked into its eyes, feeling like they would suck her in, and asked the same question as if the Brigit she saw reflected in those eyes could answer her.

"Who am I?"

"*Understood*," boomed a sonorous voice in her mind.

As soon as she registered it was the dragon's voice, a flood of information poured into her brain.

"Agh!" She somehow managed to withstand the headache as she watched images of her young parents cradling a baby.

"Is that me?"

The Red Dragon showed her memories of her birth. It must have been its way of answering her question.

The baby started to stand and walk around. Her magic came to life, and she started showing her superhuman abilities. She was sold to the church, so she would be taken away. Brigit watched herself from a third-person point of view, observed herself focus on training to become a hero and spend her days driving away monsters. She felt like she was sinking into a calm ocean.

"That's me."

These were the days where she just kept fighting. She had no family, no friends, no lover, but she also had no regrets. She felt proud seeing the smiles of those she'd saved from monsters cheering for her.

"I am a hero of my Lady Elazonia. There's nothing shameful about that."

Brigit started to stand with her great sword in hand, realizing she'd been a coward, but then she froze in place.

"…Huh?"

She saw images of herself entering the restricted zone. She had just defeated a massive deer monster when she was caught off guard by a gigantic worm digging through the earth below her feet and a gryphon flying in the skies above her. They rushed in and tore into her head and torso, resulting in her very first death. These images were gory and grotesque, but Brigit had seen hundreds of monsters die. She didn't even feel nauseous.

The problem was what followed.

"What is that…?"

Brigit's bloody limbs—chewed up by the monsters—suddenly disappeared from their mouths…and reappeared in a strange room lined with a number of large magic conductors. It was the hero resurrection facility inside Elazonia's underground laboratory. Brigit's flesh was brought there with *Apport*. A golem lifted the pieces up and placed them on a conveyor belt, where they were transported into a vat of flesh and blood from animals.

"Initiate resurrection."

A different golem pressed a button on a magic conductor, activating a *Resurrection* spell. Masses of meat—once Brigit's body—started to materialize by pulling in the dark flesh and blood in the vat.

"Ugh…!" Brigit was desperately trying to hold back the sharp acidic sting in her throat from coming up.

So what if her body was remade with the flesh of animals? It was no different from consuming animal meat, which generated into her body tissue. That's what she tried to tell herself anyway.

In her mind, she saw the images of her body after the resurrection was complete. There was no light in its eyes as it lay limply like a lifeless doll. Her body had been re-created using her genetic information, but the memories in her brain had been lost when the monsters' teeth had crushed it. A husk of a body was placed on another conveyor belt where it was eventually taken to a bed. Another golem on standby placed a strange-looking helmet over her head when she arrived and pressed the button on the magic conductor that the cables on it connected to.

"Initiate install."

Brigit's memories had been broadcast from her hero symbol and stored in that magic conductor. Now they were being shoved back into that empty brain with a spell. The body spasmed a few times before it was teleported back to the church nearest to her previous location. Her eyes slowly opened. Brigit stood watching those vivid images of her past self.

"That's me…?"

She was a living creature whose body was formed from the flesh and blood of animals, with memories copied and pasted from a magic conductor. That creature was definitely a human, but was it really *her*?

"……"

Something inside Brigit sounded like it snapped. She stood there frozen in place.

In her mind, she saw herself go back into the restricted zone, challenge numerous monsters, and get killed and eaten again. Her bloodied corpse was again resurrected in the vat of flesh and blood and laid on the bed for her memories to be installed. During the process, the first golem placed a chunk of flesh belonging to Brigit that it'd missed the first time around on the conveyor belt. The piece was taken to the vat, resurrected, and came out again: the same chestnut-haired, blue-eyed girl.

"Uh…"

There was a Brigit lying in the bed having her memories installed and a Brigit being pulled from the vat of blood. One of the golems discovered there were two of her and let out a high-pitched error warning, then submerged the newest Brigit back into the vat.

"Initiate disposal."

It pressed a different button from the one used for resurrection, activating *Blood Mixer*, a spell that formed blades from the blood and chopped Brigit's body into tiny bits. That Brigit was turned back into fragments of flesh that would be used as materials for future resurrections, while the other Brigit was sent to the church. There were two of her, copies, like when you mass-produced an object. One was killed, and the other was alive, returning to the restricted zone, where it repeated the process again.

"Aah…"

Brigit moaned. Each of the Brigits who'd died seemed to appear in front of her like an illusion. Together, they all opened their mouths and asked, *Who am I? Who are you?*

"Aaaaaaaaaah!!"

She heard something shattering and screamed so loud she strained her vocal cords, then started scratching herself. The Brigit born from her parents no longer existed. What was here was nothing more than a shadow of an imitation of her.

"Who am I?" Brigit had asked, and the Red Dragon had answered that question. She just wasn't expecting *this*.

"No! No! Noooo!" She raked her nails across her arms, tearing apart her skin. Hurting herself wouldn't mend her broken heart.

And wasn't that fake, too?

"I… I…"

She couldn't even bring herself to say her own name. She just stood there tearing at the body that wouldn't even let her die.

The Red Dragon had only one question inside him at the sight of Brigit as she was on the brink of insanity.

"Why?"

He didn't understand why she was falling apart. He'd originally had absolutely no interest in humans. He slept deep below steep mountains, only coming to the surface once every few hundred years. The humans had feared him as a devil and worshipped him as a god, but he'd never even known. His fellow dragons might watch humans to kill the time, protect them as another specimen, or congratulate brave challengers, but the Red Dragon had never cared like they did.

Of course, humans were the only living creatures who had developed the capacity to destroy the planet, meaning they were a race with the potential to become his enemy. He was a little wary of them. However, it was hard to imagine things would come down to that for at least another thousand years. He'd simply crush them when the time came.

Unlike his fellow dragons who were forced to burrow below the surface, the Red Dragon's sleep was never disturbed. He'd never had the opportunity to develop any sort of emotion toward humans. Brigit was the first human to ever stand in front of him.

"*Why?*" he'd wondered when she suddenly materialized in front of him and launched her attack.

He searched the planet's memories to learn about the Goddess Elazonia and her heroes, as well as the fact that some humans even viewed dragons as an enemy. He quickly guessed this woman posed no threat to him. He simply found Brigit's mind a mystery because she continued such a pointless activity for so long.

That was the first time that the Red Dragon, who had felt nothing toward humans for so long, had even become aware of one of them. So when she stopped swinging her sword and asked her question, he decided he'd see what would happen if he answered. It was simple curiosity; it was neither from good intent nor from ill. However, the answer made her lose her mind to the point of self-harm.

"Why?"

He didn't understand. If the genetic information for the body and the neural connections in the brain—the memories—hadn't changed, then she was the same person. It didn't matter if the atoms in her cells were replaced with new ones or if the memories were put into a different medium. Brigit was still Brigit. But for some reason, she was screaming and trying to destroy her own body like she couldn't stand it.

"…Why?"

He didn't understand. His actions had led to her suffering, but that did no harm to him. His heart ached, and he felt unpleasant emotions as he watched her. That was the thing the Red Dragon understood the least.

"Search."

Because he didn't understand, he probed the planet's memories. What was the appropriate thing to do if a human woman was screaming and crying? The Red Dragon found his answer. He separated his core from the massive form of the dragon and changed into the form of a human male.

It was a form suitable for stopping a woman who was crying. Now a handsome red-haired prince, he healed Brigit's injured body with his magic and wrapped his muscular arms around her to prevent her from hurting herself again.

"It's okay," he said, murmuring into Brigit's ear, using these unfamiliar human vocal cords.

No matter how much she thrashed and injured the Red Dragon's new body, he continued to hold her.

"It's okay."

He didn't even know himself what was okay. He was only certain of his goal: to no longer see her in such pain.

"You're going to be okay."

He repeated himself, cradling Brigit for hours until she finally stopped lashing out.

“Aaah… Gaaaah!”

She started crying tears from a different emotion and suddenly pressed her lips against the Red Dragon’s. She started hugging him back, wishing to forget everything. He looked into the planet’s memories to learn what he should do in this situation.

What he didn’t understand was that his heart had started to ache again. It was completely different from the tightness in his chest before, and it was not unpleasant. He couldn’t understand it himself, but he gently pushed Brigit to the ground and—

“Owieee!” The Blue Dragon shrieked in pain, abruptly halting the stream.

“What’s wrong?!” asked Shinichi.

“Urgh… Red noticed and stopped me.”

“Oh,” Shinichi said, accepting the explanation with a strange expression as the Blue Dragon rolled on the ground, clutching her stomach. “If I knew someone was about to see me sleeping with someone, I’d probably do the same.”

“But don’t you think it’s a little too cruel to teleport a bunch of aqua regia into my tummy?”

“You’re all monsters.”

It was horrific that the Red Dragon would forcibly inject someone with poison, but it was scarier that the Blue Dragon could withstand the pain. These creatures were on a totally different playing field.

“Damn, and while I was not paying attention for a brief second, he went and blocked the information about them having sex!” The Blue Dragon pouted.

“Actually, we don’t really need to see that anyway,” retorted Shinichi.

Their daughter wouldn’t want to see her parents sleeping together anyway. Shinichi looked at Arian and saw that she seemed unable to hear the rest of them talking as she looked down glumly.

“……” Arian stood in silence, a look of agony on her face, and Regina patted her on the shoulder in sympathy.

“Take it all in. I know it’s tough knowing the Red Dragon will be able to see when you and Mr. Groom over here sleep together,” she consoled.

“Yeah…” Arian nodded. “Wait, that’s not the problem! Well, it is a big problem!” She turned bright red.

The Blue Dragon looked at them with a smile, stomach problems seemingly cleared. “Red’s an honest guy. He wouldn’t peep on his daughter.”

“E-exactly!”

“I will, though,” she added.

"…I knew it. The dragons must be destroyed."

This was the first time Shinichi had agreed with Elazonia on something. He was so grateful the Red Dragon was a respectable being. "Anyway, it looks like Arian's mom learned she was a 'Swampman'…"

That said, he didn't feel too disgusted by Brigit. He looked at her resurrections the same way as the Red Dragon—that it wasn't a problem as long as the genetics and memories were the same. But Shinichi was the exception. Any normal person would be shocked by the revelation.

I imagine it stings for Arian, too…

Even if Brigit was a "Swampman," it didn't change that she was Arian's precious mother. Now she understood all the suffering her mother had gone through, which was enough to tear her heart to pieces. But these events were all in the past. Brigit was already gone, and they'd even defeated the source of her troubles—Elazonia. There was nothing Arian could do for her mother now, which made her feel even worse.

The Red Dragon must have been so stubborn about this because he knew it would hurt Arian.

Well, he must have been embarrassed, too.

"Can we skip the hanky-panky and see what happened after that?" asked Shinichi, and the Blue Dragon nodded after a moment of silence.

"Yeah, I don't think Red cares about that."

Maybe he evaluated it was best for his daughter to finish what she started.

"If you give me a chance to have at it with Red," mused the Blue Dragon, "I could have him unlock the X-rated scenes." She snickered.

"Cut it out," snapped Shinichi, paling.

If two Proxies really went all-out against each other, they wouldn't just be destroying the demon world.

"If I could see a real *Dragon Breath*, then the demon world is a small price to pay…," whispered Regina, seriously considering the offer.

"Don't you think you're enjoying this a little too much?" snapped Shinichi before turning to the Blue Dragon. "Okay, show us the rest."

"You got it! ♪ "

She resumed the stream of memories rushing into their minds.

Brigit's once-fractured sanity could only be healed by time. It took three months.

"I am…"

Her consciousness finally returned, and she looked at her own right hand to see that there was no longer a hero symbol there. The Red Dragon had finally realized it had driven Brigit to madness and dispelled it. He'd shown Brigit memories of the past, so she understood Elazonia was nothing

more than a ghost who'd done horrific things and increased her followers to collect more magic.

"I am not a hero anymore."

She'd lost her immortality and her faith in Elazonia. She felt neither joy nor sorrow, just an empty feeling of nothingness.

"Who am I?"

She wasn't a hero anymore. She was some fake construct, barely human. She had no value. Brigit hugged her shoulders like she was cold, then realized she was completely naked.

"Where are my clothes?!"

She quickly looked around, and her eyes fell on the face of a handsome redhead sleeping peacefully beside her. As soon as she remembered this was the Red Dragon, her memories of the past three months came rushing back.

"Uh, ah…"

While she had been raging, crying, and screaming, he had been with her —sometimes tenderly, sometimes passionately. When she had been as immobile as a corpse, he had fed her and washed her dirty body. Her face started to burn now that all the memories were fresh in her mind, and she watched the Red Dragon open his eyes, smile at her, and stroke her cheek gently.

"You're going to be okay."

The floodgates opened, drowning Brigit in shame.

"Noooooooo!" Brigit shrieked, jumping away from the Red Dragon and frantically pulling on her scattered clothes and equipment. She fled the underground space as fast as she could.

"Wh-what have I done?!"

She screamed in anguish the entire time she ran through the long tunnel leading to the surface.

It didn't matter that she had slept with the Red Dragon. She knew the truth about Elazonia now, which meant she was no longer her faithful follower. She had no contempt toward the dragons or demons.

She was embarrassed that she had wailed like a newborn and become infatuated with some man even though she was known as a powerful hero.

"No, I'm not some harlot!" She continued to rush away, covering her face with her hands, looking a lot like her daughter would in the far future.

Once Brigit returned to the surface, she put as much distance between them as she could. She eventually came to a stop in a forest she didn't recognize.

"Huff, huff…"

She'd run out of breath, face still twisted from shame.

All of a sudden, she went tense and swung her great sword.

"Hi-yah!"

The slash was so fast you wouldn't have guessed she'd spent the last three months doing nothing. Without a single sound, two halves of a hawk

monster came falling from the sky. Brigit leaped forward to avoid the shower of blood and thrust her great sword deep into the earth.

“Do you want some of this, too?!”

The blade pierced the brain of a mole monster hiding beneath the ground, and it died before it even had a chance to break the surface.

Brigit slowly pulled the great sword out and scanned her surroundings. She must have drawn them to her with her running and screaming. She could hear dozens of monsters rushing her way. Since she was no longer an immortal hero, the wise choice would be to run away, but Brigit readied her sword and turned to attack the horde of monsters.

“This is perfect. I can take my frustration out on you!”

Brigit attacked with the very selfish reason of blowing off some steam, slashing out sideways and splitting the two-headed wolf coming at her in half.

While the Red Dragon had held her, she’d been exposed to his magic waves at very close range for a long time. Her body was now as strong as a demon king. On top of that, she was raging from her powerful emotions. Eventually, she stood in front of a mountain of monster corpses. She was struck by vertigo, perhaps from fatigue, and she fainted.

When she next opened her eyes, she found herself lying in a dimly lit cave.

“Where am I…?”

“Oh, you’re awake.”

“—Ack?!”

She saw the fur-covered face of a middle-aged woman looking down at her, and she jumped backward. The woman didn’t seem bothered by her reaction. She poured a green-colored tea into a wooden cup and offered it to Brigit.

“The name’s Gunda. I won’t eat you or nothin’, so you can relax.”

“…I’m Brigit.” She introduced herself though she was still cautious. She accepted the cup from Gunda, the fur-covered woman, and brought it to her lips. The green tea smelled slightly bitter but refreshing, and it seemed to calm her nerves. “It’s good.”

“Isn’t it? The men in the house haven’t got any taste. They just say ‘more meat and none of that dirty water.’” Gunda smiled and refilled Brigit’s empty cup.

Brigit gratefully accepted the refill as she dug through her memories. “I was in the middle of giving that mob of monsters a good thrashing, then I passed out…”

“Yep. I’ve never seen someone as strong as you in my whole life!” said Gunda excitedly.

Brigit sat up properly and bowed her head. “You’re the one who saved me, aren’t you? Thank you.”

“It was no bother. Aren’t you afraid of us?” Gunda pointed to her furry face, but there was no disgust in Brigit’s eyes. “I thought people who came over the mountains like you hated beast morphs.”

“…That was the case.”

If this were a few months ago, she would have been unable to accept the beast morphs, as they were similar in appearance to demons. In fact, she would have instinctively killed them, but she’d learned several truths from the Red Dragon. She no longer felt any hostility toward them.

“Besides, I’m…,” she started to say, then looked down with a dark expression and muttered, “…a monster pretending to be human.”

Gunda yanked up Brigit’s hunched shoulders. “Hey now! Don’t be down on yourself! The mountain god went out of his way to save you. You should be happy!”

“Mountain god?” Brigit seemed skeptical.

“A spirit of some sort, I imagine. I’m not all that sure,” said Gunda uncertainly. “When I saw you passed out, I heard a strange voice in my head that said ‘mother, baby, save.’”

“…What?”

“I panicked ’cause this was so important and punched all the men in the village who were opposed, then…”

Gunda went on with her story, but Brigit’s mind went blank. She couldn’t hear anything. That stilted speech had to be the Red Dragon. He must have known she was in danger and used *Telepathy* with Gunda, who happened to be nearby.

The issue was the second word.

“Baby?”

“You’re pregnant. Didn’t you know?!” Gunda yelped.

Brigit trembled as she looked at her belly. At most, she’d only been pregnant for three months. Her muscular abdominal muscles might have prevented her from seeing any noticeable bump. If she focused, she could feel a weak flow of power in her womb that was different from her own.

“I’m carrying the Red Dragon’s child…?”

“*He’s* the father?! Which means I was talking to the Red Dragon?!”

Gunda gripped both of Brigit’s shoulders, but Brigit was too dazed to answer. All she could do was sit there shaking.

“I’m going to have a baby…”

She felt no resentment toward the Red Dragon. She was the one at fault for craving the warmth of his skin in her panicked state. It would be wrong to place the blame on him, but…

“Is it all right for someone like me to have a baby?”

She was just a fake copy of the hero, a body made from the flesh of animals with memories installed into her mind. Was she suitable to give birth to a child? Wouldn’t it just contribute to more horrible monsters in the world?

The empty cup fell from her trembling hands as she wrapped them tightly around her shoulders. Gunda frowned, then patted her shoulders again.

“Don’t be a fool! Listen to yourself! You’ve been blessed with a precious life! If you’re trying to say something stupid like you’re not going to keep it, I might have to beat you up myself!”

“…You’re right. You’re right.” Brigit nodded slowly, giving in. Even if she was a monster, the child in her womb was innocent. Nobody had the right to end its life.

“I can see clearly now, thanks to you.” Brigit bowed her head.

“It’s not really something you need to thank me for.” Gunda scratched her nose, bashful, then took Brigit’s hand. “Hey now. If you’re feelin’ better, I can introduce you to the villagers. Once they hear you’re carryin’ the Red Dragon’s child, even the men who were opposed to saving you will welcome you with open arms.”

That’s how the village chief’s wife, Gunda, convinced Brigit to live in Mouse Village until baby Arian was born safely.

When Arian neared the age of two, Brigit spoke to Gunda with a strange expression.

“We’re going to leave the village.”

“I see.” Gunda wasn’t surprised. She offered Brigit a cup of green tea. “I sort of had a feeling you would.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” said Gunda as she stroked Arian’s red hair. “Can I ask why?”

“I want her to see the wide world with her own two eyes.”

Brigit looked at the red scales on Arian’s throat—the mark of her daughter’s father. She could easily imagine that her daughter would face major obstacles if they left this village and went into human society, which was controlled by the Goddess. Even so, she wanted Arian to know the outside world.

“I’d never seen anything, so…”

Drunk on her own strength and blinded by the Goddess Elazonia’s sense of justice, Brigit had lived her life never realizing what wickedness lurked in the shadows. She didn’t want her daughter to repeat those same stupid mistakes.

“I know I’m being selfish for forcing my own ideals onto her, but this child needs—”

“I don’t really understand these complicated things, but you don’t need to beat yourself up over it,” said Gunda as she lifted the sleeping Arian and laid her in Brigit’s lap. “Children are so much stronger than their parents think. You should raise her as you see fit, and take her to all the places you want to take her.”

“…You think?” Brigit smiled and gently stroked her daughter’s cheek. Gunda patted her back strongly and sent them on their way.

Brigit said her good-byes, thanking the villagers before leaving with Arian strapped to her back. She sprinted out of the restricted zone so fast the monsters couldn't even keep up with her, crossed the Matteral Mountains, and returned to human civilization. There, she plunged the great sword that had been her partner for so many years into the ground like a grave marker.

"Thanks. And good-bye." She said her farewell to her great sword so that she could make a clean break from the hero she used to be, then set off walking.

She touched her hair, which had grown quite long. "This will do, but I'll have to buy different clothes, and maybe I should change how I speak."

It had already been three years since she'd disappeared, but there were probably still those who remembered the face of Brigit, their incredible hero.

"It would really suck if Cronklum found me."

Brigit had no way of knowing the Elderly Cardinal had already started rearing a hero candidate, who would be known as the Saint, to replace her.

"Maybe we'll head to the west first."

They'd try and live somewhere far away from the Holy City where the church had the most power, somewhere where no one knew them.

"Does that sound good?"

"Eeee!" Her daughter squealed happily on her back, though Brigit wasn't sure if she'd understood or not.

Brigit smiled back at her daughter and walked beneath the bright blue sky.

Arian had memories about the things that happened after that. They helped farmers, hunted in the forests to get their food, and lived on the road as they traveled to all sorts of villages and towns. Thinking about it now, that wasn't just to keep the fact that she was a half dragon a secret—it was to show Arian all sorts of things.

Verdant green forests. Ravaged grass plains. Sparkling metropolises to the smallest of villages. She saw people who would kindly offer them food and people who would spit on them for being unacquainted nomads. Brigit must have wanted Arian to see all there was in human society, so she could someday decide for herself how she wanted to live her life.

This little girl is going to be so much stronger than me, she thought.

She grimly looked at the innocent young girl chasing a dragonfly.

She's started feeling inferior because she's different from the other children, because she's a dragon's daughter, and that's subconsciously keeping her strength in check, but…

Her incredible half dragon powers would awaken when she was feeling an explosive emotion. Brigit didn't know if that emotion would be a good one—kindness or bravery—or a bad one like anger or hatred.

That's exactly why I want her to see the world.

She wanted her to see all the beauty, all the ugliness with her own eyes so that she could grow up to be a kind child who loved people.

I couldn't do that. I couldn't see anything because I was blinded by my strength and faith…

Brigit looked into the distance as she kept watch over her daughter, who was still sprinting around.

In the spring just before Arian's twelfth birthday, Brigit collapsed from illness. Even though she wasn't good at healing magic, she had used a little bit of *Pain Block* to ignore the problem, which ended up being a detriment to her. By the time they found the illness, it was too late, and the symptoms had only worsened. Magic couldn't completely heal her, so it was said that she was at the end of the "life span the Goddess gave her." It was a fatal disease from which a normal person couldn't even be resurrected.

She had cancer.

"Mom, stay with me!" Arian clutched her emaciated mother close as she lay in the bed loaned to them by a kind farmer, warm tears spilling down her face.

Brigit smiled contently and stroked her daughter's red hair.

"Arian, no matter how much pain you're in or how much it hurts, you should never hold a grudge."

Brigit herself had gone off that path when she'd become the hero of the Goddess—a spiteful woman who'd abandoned her human body and become a god. That's why she didn't want her daughter to make the same mistakes.

"You are human. You're a bit stronger than other people, but you are human."

Arian was different from her. She wasn't a fake copy of a human. She had the blood of a dragon in her, but Brigit wanted her to live proudly as a human without becoming some beast drunk on power. She knew it was selfish of her to push what she couldn't do onto her daughter, but she couldn't explain it to her crying child.

I could never tell you I'm just a fake…

She was terrified of her daughter looking at her with disgust in her eyes, of her wishing she was never born, so she kept that her secret until the very end.

Ah. I never realized I was so weak.

Standing on the brink of death, she finally understood. Even if her body and magic were strong enough for her to kill hundreds of monsters, her heart had remained infantile from the day her parents had abandoned her.

If only I could cry…

It would have been so much better if she'd cried like her daughter did now, clinging to her chest and begging her not to leave her alone. But Brigit had never experienced a painful loss. She would have been too ashamed to show her weakness, even to her family. She still would have chosen to go alone.

I was such a vain and weak girl. And that…

A smile spread across Brigit's haggard face, finally finding the answer in her last moments. Then she stroked the red hair of her daughter—her only child, who was going to be alone because of Brigit's own stubbornness.

"I'm sorry I'm so pathetic."

She closed her eyes forever. The sound of her daughter crying drifted farther and farther away, and in the moment just before her consciousness faded completely, she heard a familiar voice in her mind.

"…You okay?"

If she grabbed on to that voice, he would surely heal the incurable disease and pull her back from the edge of death. But Brigit was stubborn to the very end.

"It's okay. This is okay."

She might have just lived her life as a stupid copy, but the twelve years spent with her daughter were all she could have ever asked for.

She said thank you and good-bye to the one who had given her that and was the only man she had ever loved. Her life came to an end before she reached forty.

"Every time I watch a life with dramatic twists and turns, I'm thankful that humanity managed to hang in there! ♪ "

"Take a hint." Shinichi glared at the Blue Dragon, who casually let such horrible things slip out of her mouth, then he patted Arian's back as she clung to his chest crying.

"You weren't a copy or anything… You were my mom… I wish you would've lived longer!"

If only Brigit could have stood her ground that she would always be herself, regardless of if she was some "Swampman" with a copied memory. If only she could have lived more boldly by using the church to her advantage or relying on the Red Dragon's power. Brigit never could have done that. Just like she had realized in the very end, she was a weak and stubborn woman.

"Do you hate your mom?" asked Shinichi.

"I would never!" Arian shook her head vigorously.

Shinichi smiled back. "Then you should do what your mom wanted for you—see all sorts of things and live as a human."

That was the only offering she could give to her mom now that she had passed.

"Yeah!" Arian nodded, wiping her tears and looking into Shinichi's face. "I'll keep living. I don't want to leave you or the children alone."

"…You do know what you're saying, don't you?" Shinichi's cheeks turned red.

The grinning faces of Regina and the Blue Dragon loomed over them.

“Ha-ha-ha. Already planning for parenthood?” Regina laughed. “Looks like Rino and Celes will need to get things moving.”

“*Children*, huh? Just how many times are you planning to get in the sack?” giggled the Blue Dragon.

“Wha—?!” Arian’s face turned bright red. This bordered on sexual harassment.

Unlike her past self, she didn’t try to skirt the question and instead sheepishly nodded back.

“Yeah! I’m going to become Shinichi’s wife! Just you wait!”

“…You’ve really grown.” Shinichi was moved by her bright smile and hugged her slender frame.

He wasn’t exactly happy with the others watching them, so he stepped away from Arian quickly and turned to the Blue Dragon. “Thank you for your help today.”

“Oh, it was nothing. Come back anytime. And what better way to thank me than with a front-row seat to your first night together? ♪ ”

“See you never!” spat Shinichi, turning on his heel. Regina cast *Fly*, and they left.

The Blue Dragon waved. “I’m excited to see what you get up to in your life, outsider!”

She wasn’t being facetious. The knowledge he’d brought with him from Earth had greatly altered the course of Obum. There was nothing more entertaining than that.

“I wonder how far you and your descendants will go!”

Maybe they’d surpass the ancient civilization. Maybe even Earth. They might break the chains of gravity—or even surpass the dragons, trivial little beings who only had the power of one planet—or travel through space. The possibilities were endless.

“I’m looking forward to it. I hope you go at it like rabbits and make litters of little babies! ♪ ”

“And I hope you die!” He flipped her the bird, sighing as he looked north to where the Red Dragon was.

I am so glad Arian’s dad is an upstanding being…

Shinichi felt like he heard someone talking to him—*“Dad, name, unpleasant”*—but he pretended to mind his business, holding Arian’s hand as they flew through the demon world’s night sky.

The Dirty Way to Seduce a Goddess's Ex-Hero

The snow melted to make way for spring, which was graduation season at Demon King's Academy.

"You've all worked very hard for the past two months," Shinichi commended the fifteen students lined up in the gym.

Though it was only a short time, the human children had learned to use simple spells, and the demon children advanced to multiplication tables. Their faces brimmed with confidence.

"I hope you can apply what you learned here and continue to devote yourself to the pursuit of knowledge."

As Shinichi bid his farewells, the girls listening all started to cry.

"I'm going to keep practicing the magic you taught me, Rino, even once I get back home."

"And I'll study hard until I can do division."

"Ooh, I wanted to study more with you guys…"

They were supporting each other, having overcome the barriers of species and status. Their sorrowful good-byes were proof that Demon King's Academy had been a success.

Shinichi was overjoyed, but he assumed a sheepish look. "This is the end of the semester. The academy itself isn't closing."

"Really?!" cried Rino, wiping the tears from her eyes.

Shinichi nodded in response. "I'm not anywhere near finished teaching. It'll come down to the kings, but I plan to double the number of students and open for the fall semester."

"Yaaay! I'm so happy!"

Rino and the others took one another's hands in glee. Norman, a newfound furry and the third son of Baron Siamese, looked happily at Tama's cat ears and tail.

"We'll be able to see each other again…"

"Were you that sad at the idea of being away from me, *meow*?"

"N-no! I just wanted to study magic and get stronger—"

"Stronger than me so that I'll marry you, *meow*? Oh man, it's so hard being this popular with the boys, *meow*."

"I didn't say that!"

Shinichi looked warmly at the boy who was completely wrapped around the catgirl's little finger, then noticed three beautiful long-eared girls looking their way from the entrance.

"More…little…boys… Maybe it would be faster to raise our ideal man than it would be to try to find an ideal prince?"

"Brilliant idea, Clarissa!"

"You're a genius!"

"…Are they all pedophiles?"

Shinichi was just going to pretend he didn't hear the elves scheming about their own Hikaru Genji Plan. He beckoned to the Demon King hanging back at the side.

"We'll close with some final words from our principal."

"Mm."

One step of the blue giant was enough to almost topple the kids, but they ground down, trying to resist it. He nodded in satisfaction.

"Whether they be human or demon, I respect the strong, which comes from more than magic or muscles."

He looked at his own advisor as he spoke. Without his skillful strategies, the Demon King wouldn't have won against the Goddess Elazonia.

"Nothing would give me more joy than for you to train your bodies, focus your minds, and become strong enough to defeat me!" the principal encouraged them.

"""Yes sir!""" the students said.

The Demon King nodded in satisfaction again and smiled. "However, I will not allow any insolent person to look at my beloved daughter with impure intentions!"

The normal idiot father came bursting out.

"That wraps up his speech." Shinichi was used to these sudden outbursts, so he just let it slide, bringing this ceremony to an end.

After that, the children split into groups, lugging bags containing their books and personal effects. Those from Boar Kingdom went with Arian and Celes, those from Tigris gathered around Sanctina, and the demons went with Rino. All teleported back to their respective hometowns.

"Phew. We made it." Shinichi sighed and looked around the gym, which felt really empty now that the students had all gone home.

The King of Tigris would soon start selling rifles, and the southern countries that bought them would inevitably start a war. Vermeita was in charge of handling that, leaving Shinichi with an empty schedule for the time being. He looked around him and spoke in a low voice.

"Your Majesty, I would like to speak with you about an important matter."

"Speak." The Demon King lent him his ear, expression drawn.

Arian, Rino, and Celes returned to the Demon King's castle after taking the children home and gathered under the warm spring sun on a terrace to have a cup of tea.

"There's no more snow. It's almost time to plant potatoes," noted Arian.

"I want to help, too!" Rino cried.

"Would it not be faster to use *Telekinesis*? You would avoid getting your hands dirty," said Celes.

They were enjoying a trivial conversation and some candy from Boar Kingdom.

“It’s taking a while for Sanctina to get back,” Arian observed.

“Apparently, she had business in Tigris. I believe it had something to do with ‘Goddess Rino’s upcoming live performances.’”

“Whaaat?! I haven’t heard anything about that!”

“Ah-ha-ha… Well, I think people might be looking forward to celebrating the snow melting. Would you be willing to sing for them?” Arian asked.

“Of course. I love singing. I just wanted to have the picnic that Shinichi was talking about…” Rino looked around for Shinichi to ask him if the schedule would allow time for one, but she didn’t see him.

Celes took the hint and sent a *Telepathy* into the castle. “…Yes, understood.”

“What did he say?”

“Apparently, he’s in the middle of an important discussion with His Majesty. He’ll answer as soon as they’re finished.”

“Oh.” Arian was surprised, since it was rare for Shinichi to speak with the Demon King without them, but she sipped her tea.

“……”

The conversation grew hushed. Silence settled over them.

For the approximately six months since they’d defeated the Goddess Elazonia, their days had been very calm, other than a few trips out to defeat monsters. They were sure to see problems in the days to come, but it was hard to imagine their everyday lives taking a hit. A smile spread across Arian’s face.

Celes grinned in the same way, then her expression became rigid like she regretted showing Arian her smile. “Lady Arian, do you agree it is about time?”

“Huh?”

Arian guessed what Celes was getting at from her stern eyes.

“Nothing happened. This time.”

“Yes, not *now*.”

The two of them hadn’t pressed Shinichi for an answer back when Bishop Hube had led the ten thousand heroes in an attack against them. They hadn’t been in a place to have infighting, and Shinichi seemed to dislike the idea of intimacy outside a serious relationship.

In truth, he had run around the continent, defeated the Goddess Elazonia, and built a world for humans and demons…for them.

It was finally time to settle things.

“You’re right. We have to resolve this before we start growing resentful,” said Arian.

“I’ll have no ill will toward either of you, regardless of if I win or lose,” Celes assured her.

“What are you two talking about?” Rino was the only one confused as the two nodded to each other, steeling themselves for what was to come.

Celes fixed her precious mistress's collar. "Lady Rino, do you love Sir Shinichi?"

"So much!"

"Do you wish to marry him?"

"Of course!" declared Rino happily.

Celes smiled. "Me too. I have romantic feelings for him."

She bared her true feelings, hiding nothing.

"Huh…?"

"But it's not just us." Celes turned her gaze from Rino and looked at her other competitor.

Arian didn't turn away. "I also love Shinichi. I want to marry him and build a happy family."

If there was anything Arian could do to repay her mother for raising her while struggling over her own identity, it was to live a happy life.

Even it meant making enemies of her friends, she was going to go after it.

"Rino, I'm sorry I hid this from you until now. But I'm not going to hand Shinichi over to anyone."

"……" Rino was silent, looking down at her lap when Arian declared war. "I knew it," she managed to whisper. "I knew you both had feelings for Shinichi."

It was obvious Arian liked Shinichi, just seeing how she acted around him. And anyone could see Celes's constant teasing was basically her way of flirting.

"I mean, even Elma liked to gossip with the other girls about which teachers were dating," Rino continued.

"I didn't know that…" Arian's cheeks turned red. It must have been super obvious to the students.

Rino had realized their feelings, though, long before the rumors, but she'd been afraid to face it. She'd subconsciously ignored the issue at hand.

"I can't keep running from my problems." Rino raised her head, looking squarely into their faces.

They needed to settle this because she loved them both dearly and wanted them to be by her side forever.

"Arian, Celes." With a dignity befitting the daughter of the Demon King, Rino declared, "We will decide who will marry Shinichi first with a game of rock-paper-scissors!"

Rino thrust out her hand, ready to go.

"…Hmm?" Arian wasn't sure if there had been a misunderstanding at some point. "Um, Rino? Were you listening?"

"Yes. You and Celes both love Shinichi."

"Yes, but…"

"So we'll decide what order we'll have our weddings."

"Why would you instantly go there?!" shouted Arian. Rino seemed to assume Shinichi would be marrying all of them.

Rino looked at her helplessly. “Huh? Aren’t we all going to marry Shinichi?”

“Not gonna happen! I’m not going to be married into a harem!” Arian crossed her arms in a giant X.

Celes had a question of her own. “Why are you so against the idea?”

“It’s bad—legally and morally—”

“The demons have no law against it.”

“…What?”

Arian finally realized the source of their misunderstanding.

In human society, she had seen it was normal for one woman to be united with one man in marriage. There were exceptions, as with anything—kings who needed an heir, the rich and powerful, like the Materialistic Cardinal Snobe. They would often have consorts or lovers along with their “official” wife.

Even then, marriages had mostly been between man and woman. Polygamy just wasn’t a thing.

However, in the demon world, there were no restrictions.

“Well, not every couple wants to add more people to the mix,” added Celes, looking at Rino.

Rino’s mother, Regina, was a raging ball of jealousy who would never allow that sort of thing. While someone as happy-go-lucky as Ribido, the succubus, wouldn’t see anything wrong with it.

“It all comes down to the people in the marriage. There is only one demon rule: If you have something to say, say it with your fist.”

“Uhhh…” Arian frowned, crudely reminded of their violent ways. “Would you be okay with that, Rino?”

When Shinichi had pet the catgirl, Rino had gotten so jealous she practically lost her mind. It was hard to imagine her accepting a polygamous marriage.

Rino’s face clouded over. “…I’m not okay with it. My heart feels all tight when I see him touching or smiling at someone else.”

“Well then—”

“But if I’m in so much pain, that means you’re both hurting, too, right?” Rino had tears in her eyes.

She might be as jealous as the Blue Princess of War, but she was as kind as a goddess. That meant that even if she was chosen as “the one,” she would be too sad about making them suffer to feel any semblance of joy.

“I always thought there was something wrong with how I thought, or that it was unfair.” Rino reached out to grab a snack. “If I ate this by myself, I would be happily full, but this guilty feeling would leave a bad aftertaste for a long time.”

She broke it into three pieces, placing one in front of Arian and another by Celes.

“…But if we split it, I might not get full, but I would be very happy.”

Her face lit up with a smile as she took her piece and ate it.

“Hold it! Husbands aren’t snacks! You can’t break them into pieces…” Arian shook her head, stressing her point even though she had been caught off guard.

Next to her, a tanned hand reached out and picked up one piece.

“Celes?!”

“I won’t say I’m not unsatisfied, but this is better than hurting Lady Rino. Besides, I’m structure neutral about the husband-and-wife thing.”

“What?” Arian was lost.

Celes finished chewing. “All I want is for us to connect heart-to-heart. And…a master-maid relationship might spice things up.”

“I knew it was something pervy!” shrieked Arian, bummed that she had even taken Celes seriously.

Rino picked up the last piece and held it out to Arian. “Here.”

“But…it’s…I…uuuugh!” Arian cried and put her head in her hands with the piece right in front of her.

There were no legal restrictions barring them in demon society, nor anything morally wrong with it. The greatest problem with having multiple wives and children was the financial problems that come with it, but the Dirty Advisor could use magic to make gemstones or sell any number of his ideas—like the matchlock rifles. Money was a non-issue. Besides, the three girls were powerful enough that they would never have to worry about placing food on the table.

That meant the only thing stopping them was Arian’s own feelings.

Am I self-centered if I want him all to myself?

Was she cruel enough to ditch a happily-ever-after for everyone if it meant he would be hers?

Or is everyone trying to share him because they’re afraid of the truth?!

Afraid of not being picked, they were starting to cooperate so there were no losers. It was as sweet as candy, and temptation gripped her heart.

She scolded herself and planted her foot down.

I’m his hero. How can I call myself a hero if I let cowardice get the better of me? Well, I guess it’s not very hero-like to hurt others for my own gain…

Her heart started to pound. Her breathing became heavy. She was on the brink of collapse. She started to move her hand, and—

“Ha-ha-ha, I would never be like the Blue Dragon, but it seems it is worth peeking through a window once in a while.”

“…Regina, what are you doing?” Arian barked back, stiffening when she realized the Blue Princess of War had been watching from nearby.

“Mommy, how long have you been there?!”

“From the very beginning.” Regina pointed dramatically to the blue sky above them.

“A Peeping Tom, huh?” Celes narrowed her eyes.

Regina didn’t seem to notice. She gently stroked her daughter’s hair. “Rino, your proposal is bold and entertaining, but you’re forgetting one important thing.”

“What’s that?”

“What he wants.”

“Oh…,” Arian cried, strength leaving her body.

Even if they worried themselves sick over this, it was all pointless if Shinichi didn't agree.

"It might be important for the three of you to talk it out so you don't have any lingering resentment, but this is a little silly." Regina had shown herself and shoved them on the back. "Let's go get the answer out of him right now."

"All right!" Rino said.

"Right now?!" Arian rushed in a panic after the others, who were marching into the castle. "But wasn't he in the middle of an important discussion with the Demon King…?"

"Yes, they're in the basement." Regina could feel her husband's magic from below and led the others single file down the stairs.

While the aboveground portion of the castle had been totally remodeled after it was destroyed by Elazonia, the basement had been left intact, showing a slight coating of dust and dirt from over the course of the year.

Rino ran a finger along the wall, smiling with her eyes. "You know, it's been a whole year since I met him."

"It's felt so long and too short at the same time." Celes nodded.

Regina looked at them in annoyance. "You're talking like a pair of old ladies. Do I spot crow's-feet?"

"Lady Arian, may I please borrow your dragon sword for a moment?"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha…" Arian tried to laugh as the two started their usual bickering, and Regina led the group farther down.

After passing the training hall and dvergr workshop, they finally reached a large door on the lowest floor in the Demon King's castle.

"What are they doing here?" asked Arian.

"Hmph, I feel some magic from inside," said Regina, as confused as Arian. Neither of them had ever been to this room. There had never been a need.

Rino and Celes had visited this room once, just about one year ago. Their blood ran cold. They had a bad feeling about this.

"This room…"

"It's the place that Lord Shinichi was summoned."

"…Huh?" Arian balked.

Celes continued with a pained expression. "His Majesty had never tried summoning someone from another world. It was his first attempt. He orchestrated the ritual on the lowest floor in case anything went awry."

This was the Blue Demon King. He would never slip up enough to cause an unintended explosion, but his first to be summoned had been faint of heart. One look at the Demon King had done him in—death by heart attack.

The second trial was successful, landing them Shinichi, but the Demon King had left the magic circle intact in the room right in front of their eyes.

"It's better to use the same magic circle that summoned someone from another world when sending them back," finished Celes.

"That means…" Blood drained from Arian's face.

She sprinted to the large door, peering in through a small crack to see a large room with a magic circle on the ground. Shinichi was talking to the Demon King about something.

“So this is good-bye.”

“Are you sure?” asked the Demon King.

“Yeah, I have no regrets.”

“I see. Then you should go ahead.”

The Demon King started adjusting the magic circle slightly, and Shinichi seemed to be talking to himself. Arian couldn’t hear what he was saying.

“Oh no. Shinichi is going back to Earth…”

“What?!” Rino shrieked.

“……” Celes looked like she was holding back her emotions.

Shinichi’s job was done: He had defeated Elazonia and built the foundation of a society with humans and demons. Even without him, things would work out.

Besides, he was originally supposed to return home upon slaying the first group of heroes, but had stayed behind of his own volition. If he chose to return to Earth now, no one had the right to stop him. But…

“Shinichi!” Arian burst through the doors.

“Whoa! What’s everyone doing here?”

She ran up to the startled boy and flung her arms around him.

“Please don’t go back to Earth!”

“…Come again?”

“I know I encouraged you to return home, and this is totally selfish…but stay here—I’ll give you all of me!”

“Wait a se—” He was starting to panic when Rino clung to his right arm, tears running down her face.

“Shinichi, did you lie when you said you’d be with me until you died?”

“I have no context, but if you’ve made my daughter cry…I imagine you’re ready to fight.”

“I said wait a sec!”

The Demon King was cracking his knuckles and advancing toward him.

Celes came over and hung on Shinichi’s left arm, silently squeezing it tight.

“……”

“Why are you so affectionate all of a sudden?!”

Shinichi’s heart skipped a beat when he saw her looking like a lost child, fingers entwining his like she was never going to let him go. He almost forgot where they were.

Arian saw them and started to yell louder. “If you want, I’ll ask Dad to give me huge boobs!”

“Mine will be as big as Mommy’s one day!” Rino declared.

“If that’s what you want, I’ll try even harder.”

“What are we even talking about?!” cried Shinichi, still trying to wrap his head around this development.

The only calm observer, Regina, asked him a question. “Aren’t you returning to Earth?”

“Um? No?”

“Thought so.” Regina nodded, apparently satisfied.

He didn’t even know why she would ask him that.

Then, she flashed the three girls an annoyed look. “You heard him. You can all relax.”

“…Huh?” Arian’s jaw dropped. She was too shocked to be happy.

She looked up at his face. “…Didn’t you say you were going back to Earth?”

“I never said that. I thought I told you I would never go back.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.” Arian would never forget those words he’d whispered to her as he’d hugged her tightly.

“But you just said, ‘So this is good-bye’…”

“Oh.” Shinichi finally pieced it together and showed her the object in his right palm.

It was the strange little box that played music and videos—a smartphone.

“I’m saying good-bye to this. I was going to send it back to Earth.”

“I thought it would be a lost opportunity, since Rino likes its…music and games, but I couldn’t stop him if that was what he wanted.”

Arian cocked her head to the size, puzzled. “…Why?”

“I wanted to make sure my parents and friends knew I was doing all right in another world.” Shinichi replayed the video of himself he’d just been recording.

“Hi Mom. Hi Dad. It’s me. I’m in another world right now, and—”

“I thought they might find it easier to believe if I showed them a video.”

On the screen, Shinichi cast a spell and made a flame appear over his hand as he explained his current situation—mainly that he was doing well.

“I don’t want to go back to Earth now, but I’m sure my parents have been worrying about my disappearance and thinking I died in a ditch or something.”

Shinichi scratched his nose bashfully and paused the video.

“According to His Majesty, he can send my smartphone back to the place where I got summoned. We’ll be lucky if it gets back in one piece, but it’s better than doing noth—Uh, what’s wrong?”

Arian was looking pale. The next moment, she went bright red, flying into a blind rage at the maid.

“Celes, you lied to me! I thought my heart was going to stop!”

“All I said was that this room with the magic circle had been used to summon Lord Shinichi. I never said he was going to leave.”

“Then why won’t you look me in the eyes!”

As they blamed each other for jumping to conclusions, Rino cried tears of joy.

“Waaah. I’m so relieved…”

“You’re so dramatic. You know I never break promises,” said Shinichi.

“Yeah. You said we’ll be together until death do us part.”

“Wait! Is that what I think that means?!” asked the Demon King.

“Give it a rest, and just accept their relationship.” Regina held back the helicopter parent from pouncing on Shinichi.

The human boy smiled at the chaotic mess and held up his phone. “Would you mind taking a video with me? It’ll help my case to show I’m in another world.”

“Sounds fun!” exclaimed Rino.

“It’s for your mom, right? …Wouldn’t it be better to show her the faces of her grandchildren?” suggested Arian.

“Our pervy hero,” said Celes, “always thinking the lewdest thoughts.”

“Come on, my husband’s going to be finished with the magic circle soon,” urged Regina.

“Shinichi, I have yet to accept you as my son-in-law!” growled the Demon King like a dog standing its ground even after losing the fight.

He let Regina handle everything else, and Shinichi double-checked the amount of storage he had left on his phone.

“You’ve been through thick and thin, old friend… Oh, I still have this?”

“What is it?” asked Arian curiously.

“Blackmail for the knight hero.”

Arian peered at the phone, and Shinichi showed her the foul video of the first heroes he defeated. He wanted to treasure it as a memory.

“…Delete it.”

“Wouldn’t it be hilarious if it went viral on Earth?”

“You are so dirty,” Celes snapped, and Shinichi grudgingly deleted the video.

In that moment, in a land far away, the former hero and knight Ruzal—Shinichi’s first enemy—suddenly felt a strange weight lifted off his shoulders.

Shinichi turned the phone’s camera to the three girls more important to him than Earth. He wanted to give a proper good-bye to his parents.

Shinichi Sotoyama’s mother, Youko Sotoyama, came into possession of this exact phone, half a day after he went missing.

It all started in the morning. After Youko saw off her son and husband, finished the chores, and took a little break, she received a phone call from Shinichi’s school.

“Shinichi has disappeared from campus. Do you know where he is?” asked the somewhat panicked voice of Shinichi’s young homeroom teacher.

“Disappeared?” Youko cocked her head to the side.

Apparently, Shinichi had arrived at school as always. He’d greeted his friends in class, but then no one could find him after that. They thought he went to the bathroom and thought nothing of it. Except he still hadn’t come back after homeroom or when they started their lesson. The teacher thought that was strange and decided to contact his mother.

“Shinichi has his…quirks…but he’s a very serious student. He’s never ditched class, so I’m worried something might have happened…”

“Uh-huh.”

Compared with his homeroom teacher, his mother’s response was blasé. She knew her son was the kind of person to calmly call himself an ambulance with his good arm even when his other was broken in a car accident.

She knew he wouldn’t die without a fight, even if he did end up in danger.

“It’s not even the anniversary of the day Nozomi died. Where would he ditch school to go?”

Youko managed to console the homeroom teacher before hanging up. She spent the rest of the day lazing around and watching movies, but Shinichi didn’t come home even as it got dark out. She got another phone call from the homeroom teacher.

“Sorry to bother you again. Has Shinichi come home yet?”

“Not yet. And I suppose he didn’t return to school, either?”

“I’m sorry… But he did leave something behind.”

“All right, I’ll come pick it up now.”

Youko hopped on the bus, thinking about how that homeroom teacher was always apologizing for everything, and headed toward the high school.

There, she was handed Shinichi’s smartphone.

“This was the only thing left on his seat.”

“Uh-huh…”

“You don’t think he was kidnapped, right?!” The homeroom teacher started to weep.

“Impossible,” said Youko firmly. “If that boy was kidnapped, he’d sweet-talk the criminal into joining him in a more lucrative venture.”

“O-of course.” The homeroom teacher thought Youko was making a joke to cheer her up and offered a weak smile.

Youko was being 100 percent serious.

When she took the phone, she had a feeling that something was off.

Was it always this dirty?

She’d bought it for Shinichi only about a year ago, and he’d been really careful with it. Now it had a lot of scratches all over, and the charging port was black like it’d been burned. The phone strap she was certain had been on it was gone.

It’s hard to imagine it would be nearly inoperable in only a day…

Youko elected not to say anything, since it would just make his teacher fret even more, and left the high school. She went back home and found her husband had already returned from work. She told him what happened and plugged the phone into a charging port.

Her eyes opened wide in surprise.

“What? It’s not locked?”

Shinichi was so particular about his privacy that he’d installed facial recognition locks on his phone. He was always chuckling about how the hardest ones to crack were the best ones to hack. He would test out its

recognition capacities by trying to unlock his phone with photographs and 3D models of himself. He eventually went with the best one. It was unlike her anxious son to leave his phone unlocked and its contents viewable to anyone.

"Hmm. Can I look at it?"

"It's his fault for skipping school and making us worry. It's fine. Let's take a look," urged her husband.

Youko swiped through the phone and noticed something stranger: Most of the apps had been removed from the homepage—videos were in their place.

"I think it means we should watch these," Youko guessed and hit play.

The video was recorded in a room built from stone, as if he was in some castle, and showed the face of their son, though he looked stronger than before.

"Hi Mom. Hi Dad. It's me. I'm in another world right now… Sorry if I made you worry."

""…What?"" they said, mouths agape as they listened to their son's fantastical message.

They could hardly believe it when he explained he'd been summoned by a demon king to another world a year ago. But his phone was so dinged up, it looked like it'd seen a year's worth of adventures. Even his face looked more mature.

"Hmm… I wonder if time flows differently there."

"Youko, that's not really the issue here," her husband said, but Youko's guess wasn't far off.

Earth and Obum were in different universes, which meant their time wasn't in sync. On top of that, the Demon King had used a spell he called *Return Home*, which sent something back to the location it was when it was originally summoned—in space *and* time.

After vanishing for a mere second from the classroom, the smartphone had returned to its original location—while a full year had passed on Obum.

Of course, Youko wouldn't have any way to know that. Besides, something more interesting was happening now in the video.

"H-hello, future mother-in-law! It's nice to meet you. My name's Arian. I'm very attached to Shinichi, and—"

"Rino here! I'm close to him, too! We take baths together and sleep in the same bed!

"My name is Celestia, Lord Shinichi's maid. Please call me Celes."

It seemed three beautiful girls—very interested in their son—were trying their best to make a good impression on their potential in-laws. Youko couldn't stop herself from breaking into a smile, though she remained uncertain about the whole thing.

"He might have sweet-talked the heck out of them. I wonder which one he likes the most?"

"Look at him, dammit! I wish I was surrounded by young, hot women."

"……"

"W-wait, honey! Those Valentine's Day chocolates were totally leftovers from the girls in the office! And that dinner was just for business! I would never cheat on—Gaaaaah!"

Youko crushed her husband's balls with her foot and looked at the video, which seemed near the end. She smiled, sighing through her teeth.

"How can you leave us to fend for ourselves in our old age…? But as long as he's happy…"

Ever since the day his childhood friend had drowned in the ocean, she'd noticed her son had changed, only ever showing anyone a fake smile. Seeing him with those girls from another world, grinning from ear to ear like he was actually happy, left her with no complaints.

After Shinichi sent his smartphone back to Earth, he asked the Demon King and Regina to erase the magic circle. He headed upstairs with the three girls.

"I feel like a weight has finally been taken off my shoulders." He looked up at the blue sky and stretched out his back.

Arian's face clouded over. "Was it the right thing to do?"

It wasn't like they couldn't redraw the magic circle, but erasing it would significantly reduce the success rate of *Return Home*. That meant Shinichi wasn't ever going back to Earth.

Shinichi turned to the girls who looked so concerned. He flashed his teeth. "It was for the best."

He had originally been summoned against his volition and had accepted the challenge of taking on the heroes for fun. Now there were too many things he cherished in this world. He had no desire to return to Earth. With the final good-bye to his parents, he was ready for the magic circle to be gone to cut off any lingering doubts.

Shinichi explained that to the girls, then remembered something. "By the way, did you need me for something?"

They'd come rushing to the lowest floor of the castle, which was usually unoccupied. He could only assume they needed him or the Demon King.

"Oh, umm…"

"Shinichi, which of the three of us are you going to marry?" Rino bluntly asked.

"Rino?!" Arian exclaimed in nearly a shriek.

The Demon King's daughter had come in swinging.

Rino smiled innocently. "Mommy's holding Daddy back. If you're going to say it, you have to say it now."

The only reason Regina had bothered to hang back in the basement was to help her daughter; it wouldn't take that much time for the Demon King to erase the magic circle on his own.

“Rino, you’re scaring me!” Arian started to tremble violently.

Celes implored him. “Please answer. Wasn’t it part of the reason you sent your smartphone back to Earth?”

“Ah, you got me,” Shinichi admitted, then shyly opened up about what was in his heart. “I’m sorry for putting this off. I knew how you felt about me, but I stayed silent because I wasn’t confident enough. Sorry.”

“I’m sure you were only thinking about the future. You don’t have to apologize,” Arian assured him.

She was happy he had held off until they were in times of peace, because it meant he wasn’t just looking for physical pleasure but loved the person enough to make him want to be with them forever.

Shinichi smiled in self-contempt, thinking her evaluation of him was far better than he deserved. “I’m just a scared chicken that couldn’t make up my mind until I eliminated all threats, set the stage, and got rid of lingering doubts.”

Shinichi was finally aware of why he lacked self-confidence.

“I was scared I’d lose someone again.”

Sometimes, the scythe of death swung between two people, cutting you apart forever. Even if you loved them.

This irrational, inevitable fear had been eating him up inside.

“Part of me thinks I should never love someone again…”

Shinichi smiled in self-contempt again, slowly looking around at the three girls’ faces.

They had already become so important to him. He didn’t want to lose any of them.

That was why he hadn’t been able to take that final step, making him a total coward.

“I don’t want to lose any of you, so I’m going to give you your answer now.”

He took a step toward the agitated girls.

“Shinichi,” implored the half-dragon hero.

She was so simple, it worried him sometimes. Her personality was a difficult one, but she was the most honest person he’d ever met—hands down.

“Shinichi,” said the Demon King’s daughter.

She’d started to show her darker side as of late, but her smile lit up countless lives like the sun.

“Lord Shinichi,” beckoned the dark elf maid.

She was expressionless at first, coming after him with her barbed tongue, but over time, she’d started showing him a cuter side.

It was because he loved these three girls that he stepped forward and told them his choice.

“Arian, I promise to make you happy. Will you continue to support me by my side?”

He took her hands, which were trembling from nerves, and squeezed them firmly.

"…Are you sure?"

"You're the only one for me." Shinichi smiled as Arian looked up at him with uncertainty. "You know I'm nothing but a weak coward. My cleverness is the only thing I have going for me. But with your support, I could defeat a god."

They had taken this world in their hands with his intelligence and her strength.

"Arian, give me your everything."

"Shinichi…"

His confession slowly settled in her heart. Tears flowed from her blue eyes. She didn't wipe them away, offering a messy smile.

"I already told you. I give you my life, my heart, my everything."

Take it, she seemed to urge, closing her eyes and tilting up her chin.

Shinichi let go of her hands, and she waited for his arms to wrap around her…

Instead, he passed by her.

"…Huh?" Arian snapped her eyes open to see Shinichi cradling Rino's small hands.

"Rino, I will be with you until I die. Will you be my guide in life to make sure I never take the wrong path?"

"Yes. I want you to tell me if I make a mistake, too, without holding back."

"I promise."

"First, I want you to tell me how you actually make babies!"

"…How'd you know I lied to you?"

"Hee-hee, it's a secret! I'm so bad." Rino smiled cutely, like a little imp.

Shinichi felt a little scared but stroked her head gently.

"…What?" Arian was confused as she watched him, but he was already moving on and holding Celes's hands.

"Celes, we have a bright future as a married comedy duo!"

"Why are you joking?" She clawed at him.

"Owww! It's just… I feel shy trying to tell you how I really feel…"

"Seriously. What do you think of me?"

"The best maid I could have ever asked for."

"…That's unfair." Celes was caught off guard by his serious confession, and her tanned cheeks flushed pink.

"……"

Arian stood there watching what was going on, no words left in her now. Shinichi smiled uncomfortably, then walked directly to her and gripped both her shoulders.

"And…um… I'm not sure how to say this, but…you're the number-one girlfriend!"

He couldn’t live without his number-one little sister or his number-one maid. He was choosing to have his cake and eat it, too.

Arian faced the self-proclaimed weak coward, eyes glaring gold in anger.

“You dirty bastard!”

She smacked him across the cheek with all her might.

“Gah!”

Shinichi was sent spiraling into the air, impact greater than when he'd been hit by a car. Arian launched herself off the ground and leaped after him.

"But I still love you!"

She was happy he'd chosen her as his number one. She pressed her lips against his.

"Wha…aaah?!" Rino blushed and covered her face with her hands, watching the two kiss between her fingers.

Next to her, Celes held back her disappointment, letting out a long sigh.

"At least she's stupid enough to be a match for this filthy rat."

The two of them watched Shinichi and Arian tumble onto the grass, still in each other's arms.

They looked up at the blue sky, beaming, then stared at each other like there was no one else in the world and started kissing again.

Afterword

Hello to readers of the Famitsu Bunko imprint. It's me, Sakuma Sasaki.

This epilogue marks the end of the series—for real this time.

As I said in the afterword in the last volume, your support made everything possible. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I guess you could call it a token of my thanks, but I am thinking of putting short stories that I couldn't include in the books up online on *Shousetsuka ni Narou (Let's Become a Novelist)* and *Kakuyomu (Write-Read)*. I imagine they should be up by the time this volume is on sale if you would like to check them out.

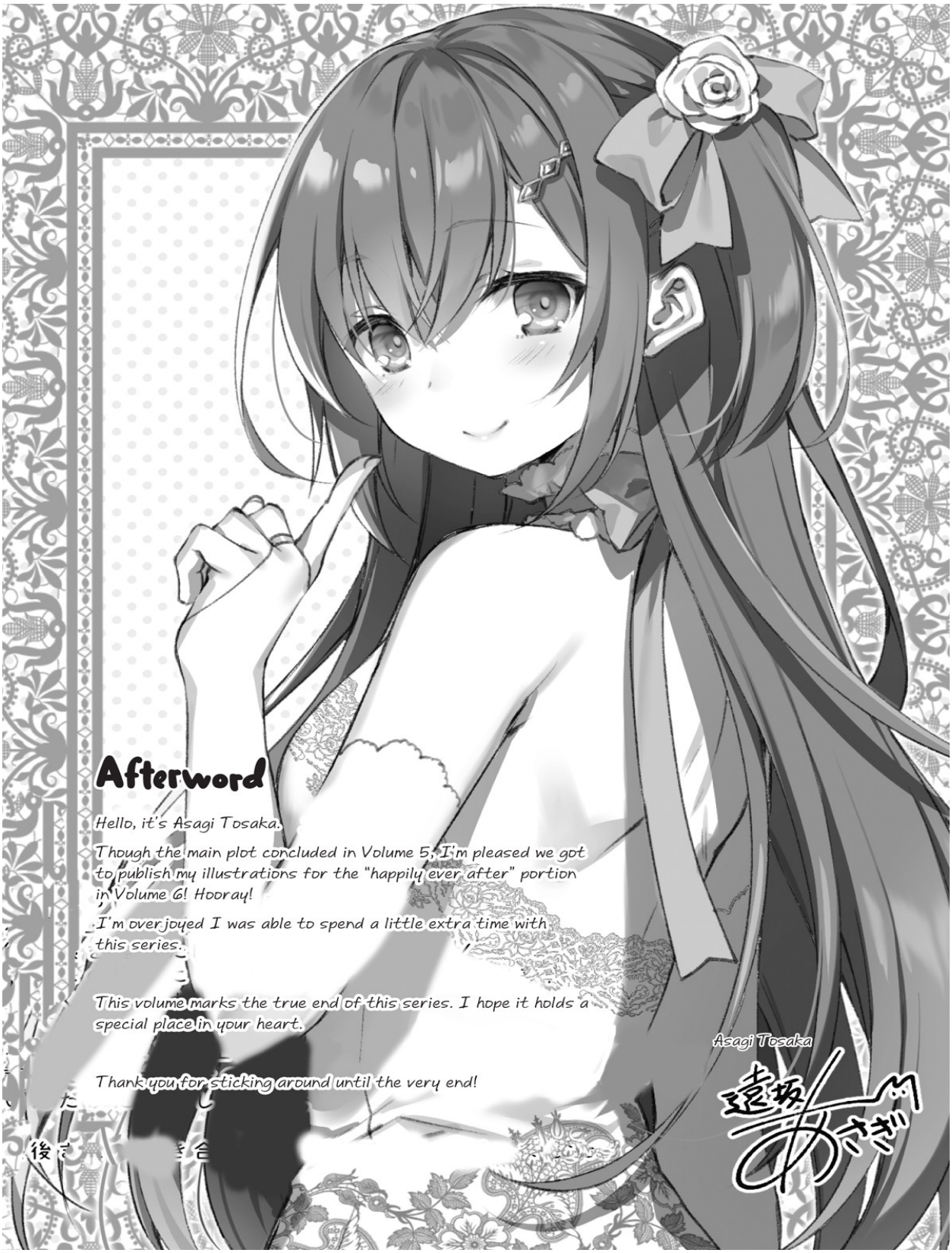
In addition, I've included some sample chapters of my newest series—*Together with the Dark Knight!* It'll be on sale at the same time as this volume. It would give me much joy if you like what you see and choose to purchase this series.

The gist of the plot is, "Out with Dragon Quest, in with Wizardry!"

I would like to thank Asagi Tosaka for illustrating this series until the end despite a packed schedule. I appreciate my editor, Kimiko Gibu, for always providing valuable advice. A huge thank-you to the proofreaders, printers, and everyone else involved in the publication of this series.

From the bottom of my heart, I would like to thank every reader who safeguarded Shinichi and his friends until the end. And with that, I say good-bye.

Sakuma Sasaki, February 2018



Afterword

Hello, it's Asagi Tosaka.

Though the main plot concluded in Volume 5, I'm pleased we got to publish my illustrations for the "happily ever after" portion in Volume 6! Hooray!

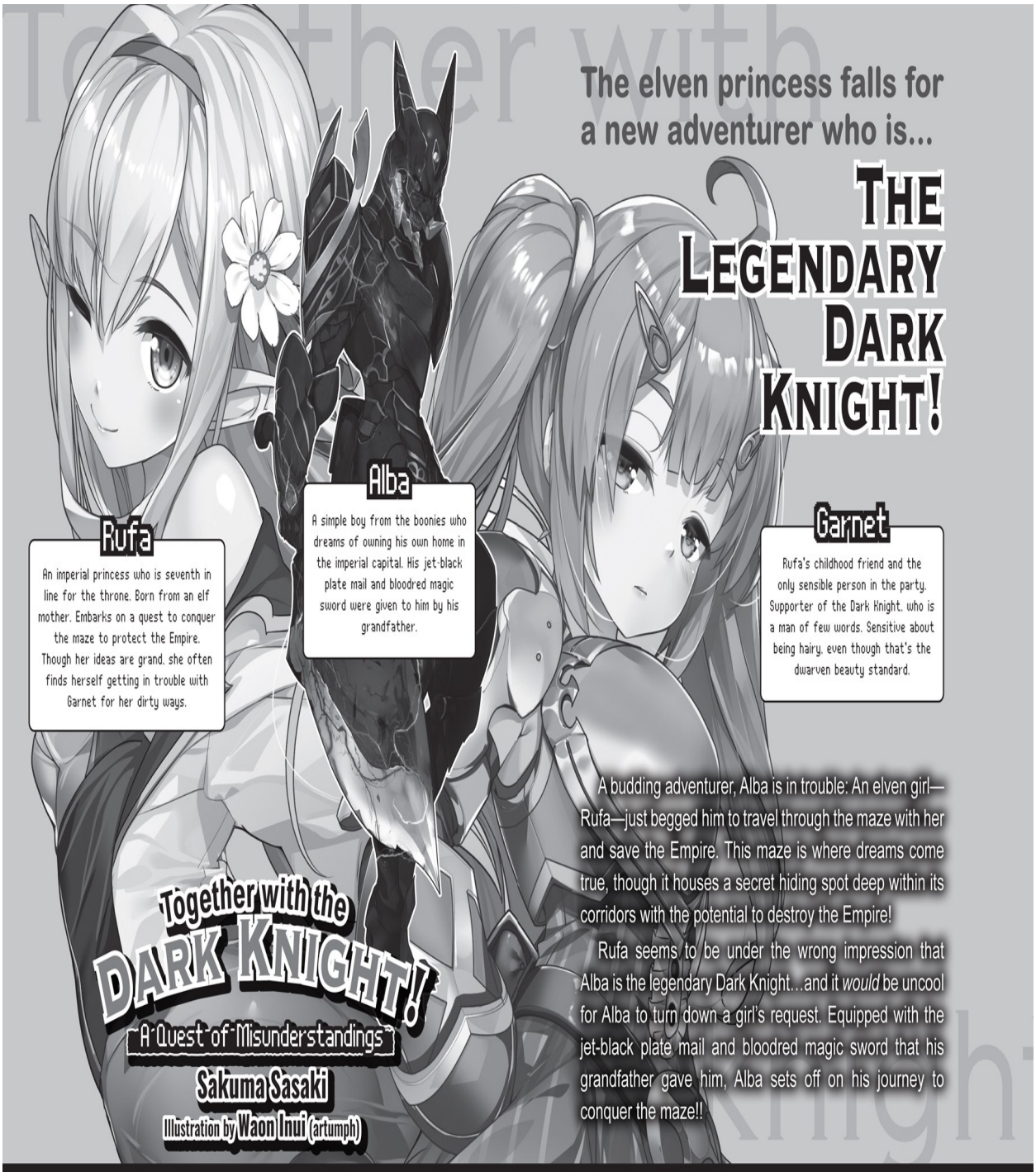
I'm overjoyed I was able to spend a little extra time with this series.

This volume marks the true end of this series. I hope it holds a special place in your heart.

Thank you for sticking around until the very end!

Asagi Tosaka

遠坂あさぎ



A budding adventurer, Alba is in trouble: An elven girl—Rufa—just begged him to travel through the maze with her and save the Empire. This maze is where dreams come true, though it houses a secret hiding spot deep within its corridors with the potential to destroy the Empire!

Rufa seems to be under the wrong impression that Alba is the legendary Dark Knight...and it *would* be uncool for Alba to turn down a girl's request. Equipped with the jet-black plate mail and bloodred magic sword that his grandfather gave him, Alba sets off on his journey to conquer the maze!!

Sakuma Sasaki's new series!!!

Read the teaser starting on the next page!! ▶▶▶▶

Introduction
A Knight Darker Than the Darkness

A passageway made of stone continued forever. Cool, damp air filled the maze, and a girl's clear voice could be heard echoing along the passages.

"Burn them to ash. *Fireball*!"

A small sphere of flame leaped from the wand that Rufa the elf mage gripped in her hand. It shot toward the goblin trying to attack her, blowing up its head.

Monsters. Nothing more than clusters of magic. The goblin burst into a million particles of light, which flowed into Rufa's body. That boosted her aura, but she didn't have time to be happy about that.

"Grark!" snarled another goblin, unfazed that its ally had just been defeated. It leaped toward her.

A dwarf heavy fighter skidded in front of Rufa. Garnet. She used the shield on her left arm to fling back the gnarled beast.

"Gyaaah!" Garnet swung the mace in her right hand down onto the goblin's head, smashing it open. That monster became light and disappeared, but the hordes of monsters in front of them didn't appear to be shrinking. In all directions were the stone walls of the maze. Essentially, they had nowhere to run. They were trapped.

"Dammit! This is all your fault!" shouted Garnet to her childhood friend behind her.

Rufa pouted unhappily in protest. "Rude. My strategy for us to get strong quick by using an *Alarm* spell was perfect."

"Perfect, huh…? If we can get out of this alive!"

If they gathered all these monsters but weren't able to defeat them, the plan was just pie in the sky. Garnet shouted at Rufa as she struck and defeated another goblin, and Rufa smiled bravely.

"Hee-hee. Have no fear. I thought this might happen, so I nabbed a spell scroll for *Fire Storm* from the castle's stores."

"This isn't the time to brag! But we have no choice now! Hurry up and use it!"

"Hee-hee… I think I may have left it back in my room."

"You dumbass!" Garnet shrieked at her as she clubbed a third goblin with her mace.

Rufa's face went pale as she rooted through her bag. Her breathing was becoming ragged. She could tell her stamina was reaching its limit.

"Urgh. I can't believe I'm going to die here…," Garnet whimpered.

The gang of monsters closed in slowly but steadily.

Behind her, Rufa steeled herself. "We have no choice. It's better for one of us to escape than for us both to be killed here."

"Are you really—?"

"It's my fault, so I'll run away. Buy me time—even if it kills you."

“I think you’ve got it backward!”

“As if a weak little elf mage could buy time! Everyone knows it’d never work!”

“Don’t get angry at *me*!”

“Or are you saying an elf girl should be violated by goblins like in some erotic novel?!”

“Oh, shut up!” Garnet used her little remaining energy to punt dirty-minded Rufa in the butt.

While their little comedy played out, the goblins were frozen still.

“I dunno about anyone else, but we’re all just blobs of magic. We ain’t got no bodily desires…”

“I wish everyone would stop assuming all sex offenders are sex pests.”

“We’ll team up with the orcs and sue you!”

Looking like she heard their conversation, Rufa’s eyes glinted as she appraised the goblins, who’d forgotten the battle for a moment.

“Now!” She dashed past the goblins who were standing still, but the gods wouldn’t overlook evil so easily.

“Awaaagh!”

Rufa’s foot caught on an uneven flagstone in the floor. She tumbled, face skidding across the floor. The goblins slowly surrounded the stupid elf who had fallen on the ground.

“…Should we kill her?”

“Guess so.”

The goblins nodded to one another, looking bored, and raised their rust-covered short swords.

“What the hell are you doing, Princess Pea-Brain?!” Garnet was furious but dashed out to try and save her friend. Just then, she felt something horrible and threw herself to the ground out of sheer instinct.

At that moment, a black beam swallowed the passageway, slashing the goblins’ torsos in half and passing directly over the girls’ heads.

“…What?”

While Rufa and Garnet watched in amazement, the monster crowd had been cut in half and their bodies scattered to the ground with a single attack. Magic swirled into their bodies, and Garnet was starting to get dizzy from the new power, but she managed to look down to the path where the black flash had originated.

“Was that sword art…?”

Maze explorers—“adventurers”—had a mysterious power called “aura.” It could be used for many purposes, even allowing a normal person to fight against powerful monsters. There were the “physical arts,” which strengthened your body, and the “magical arts,” which were unleashed through spells. Then there was “sword arts,” which allowed the user to unleash their aura by putting it into their blade.

Any adventurer who fought in the front lines of their party would know one or two of these skills, but those were generally only enough to increase

your sword's sharpness. Mowing down dozens of monsters with a massive aura blade was simply not your ordinary skill.

"Could it be a sixth-floor adventurer? But why would they be on the first floor…?"

Garnet and Rufa were more confused than excited about being saved.

In front of them, a figure silently appeared in black armor that blurred into the darkness of the maze and with a magic sword as red as fresh blood. The full helm covered even their eyes and looked like the face of the devil himself. Aura seeped from their body, spreading out behind them like unfurled demon wings, twisting the scenery around them like some sort of black heat mirage.

Was it really a human inside that armor? Or was there actually a demon?

Rufa already knew the name of that sinister armored knight.

"The Dark Knight…"

The reaper of the maze. He who stands in the way. Archenemy of all adventurers.

There wasn't a single person who had seen him and returned alive. Stories of his appearance came from those whose companions had managed to return their bodies for resurrection. His massacres were legendary.

"……"

Faced with death, Rufa looked up in amazement, unable to draw the will to fight back. The Dark Knight approached, footsteps making no sound. He raised a hand, like the Dullahan proclaiming death…

"I can see them."

…He pointed at Rufa's white panties, which had been exposed when her skirt had flipped over.

""……""

An uncomfortable silence settled between the elf in her underwear and the Dark Knight.

"…What the hell?" Garnet's question was the only sound in the maze, which was dead quiet now.

That was how Princess Pea-Brain—Rufa—seventh in line for the throne of the Gordeau Empire—met the Dark Knight, named Alba, a country boy.

Chapter 0
Formerly a Country Boy

“Whoa.”

I looked up at the stone walls that stretched out in front of me, letting out a little gasp of awe. I’d left my home village in the countryside a month ago and finally made it to the capital of the Gordeau Empire. It seemed all the more majestic, considering the hoops I’d gone through to get there.

The city was said to be home to two hundred thousand people, completely encircled by city walls ten times my own height. I had heard there were actually nine walls in total. My head spun just trying to imagine how much time and money it would have taken to construct them, even if they had used magic.

“Well, I guess it makes sense if you’re the greatest ruling country of the continent, the Millennium Empire.”

I hadn’t been entirely convinced that a single royal family had ruled for an entire millennium, but I was forced to accept it as the truth when I looked at those incredible walls.

“This is the place.” I nodded.

The only place where my dreams could come true. What dream, you ask? Well, to build my own home in the best area of the city! I mean, it’s not like I hated my home village out in the boonies. It’s just… I’ve been trying to see how far I could go, as a boy.

Let me just say, I didn’t really expect I’d ever turn into some legendary hero. I wasn’t the kind of kid to get swept up by big dreams. That’s why I decided I’d build my own home in the nicest part of the city, since that seemed like a realistic goal.

As my teacher always said, “Every man wants his own kingdom.” If I could use my own power to get my own house, I could stand proud as a true man.

“All right, here we go!”

I walked toward the city gates. I’d heard the gates could get busy in the morning, so I timed my arrival so that I’d get there just after noon. My calculations were correct. I didn’t need to wait in a long line. I walked right up to the gates, but that’s when I was instantly surrounded by a group of guards.

“Huh?” I was confused.

Wait…were they going to make me pay an entry fee?! Urgh, I didn’t have much saved after my long journey, but I guess there wasn’t anything I could do about it. I quietly reached for my money pouch at my hip, but one of the guards barked at me.

“D-don’t move!”

What? But if I didn’t move, I couldn’t pay the fee…

I was totally motionless, uncertain what to do, when a middle-aged guard wearing expensive-looking armor walked up. He looked like the captain.

“Pardon me. Who are you?” asked the captain, expression severe and face slick with sweat.

…Was he hot? It was still early spring, but the sun in the imperial capital *was* beating down. My armor had a temperature-control spell on it, but without it, I probably would have been covered in sweat, too. I wanted to tell him he was doing a great job for working despite the heat, but I just answered his question.

“I’m an adventurer.”

Well, to be perfectly honest, I was unemployed at present. I was going to become an adventurer after this, but I was hoping they’d let a little white lie slide.

The maze was a deep dungeon filled with dangerous monsters and mounds of riches. I’d selected the capital of Gordeau Empire to become an adventurer and dive into that maze. I wasn’t an aristocrat with land to my name, and I wasn’t a successful merchant, skilled at his job. I was a just a simple country boy, and that meant the maze was the only way for me to be able to build a home in the best part of the city.

Thankfully, Gramps and my teacher had trained me, so my sword skills were decent. If I tried really hard and worked for a few years, I might be able to build my home…

“Where is the maze?” I asked, taking a step forward, growing impatient about getting started.

The guards all looked like they were faced with Fenrir himself.

…Why was that? Every once in a while, I’ve crossed paths with people who seemed unsure about me. Sometimes, I even felt like they were afraid. I could understand in the small villages that didn’t see any soldiers. They must have been shocked to see a man in full plate carrying a huge sword, but this was a major metropolis with hordes of adventurers. They must see men in armor day in, day out. I couldn’t think of any reason why they’d be afraid…

“Where is the maze?” I repeated and advanced another step.

The guards immediately pulled back in unison, clearing the path.

“It’s on the right after you pass through the gate,” explained the captain, sweat running down his face.

Oh, good. I wasn’t sure what I could have done if they’d told me to get lost! I let out a sigh of relief inside my helmet, then finally passed through the gates.

Gordeau Empire. I had finally arrived!

I was all pumped up, but I didn’t see bustling city streets in front of me. It was a desolate field… Was this a sham? I turned back in shock.

“C-Captain, who was that?!” one of the soldiers whispered out of ear’s reach. “He looked just like—”

“I know. But he said he was an adventurer looking to try his hand at the maze. We had no right to turn him away.”

“B-but!”

“The Gordeau Empire owes its prosperity to adventurers. That means anyone is accepted as an adventurer, regardless of their race or birth. That’s the law. Even if it was a demon…”

I considered asking the guards for an explanation, but they seemed preoccupied with one another. It didn’t seem the right time to be interrupting.

Hmmm. What’s going on? Was this just an area that hadn’t been developed yet? I couldn’t come up with an answer, even when I racked my brains. I gave up and decided to head to the maze.

Oh, that’s right! I thought it over and looked at the second wall in sight across the field. Surely, the city streets were beyond that wall. In the distance, I could even see the tips of what looked like a castle.

Well, I wanted to check out the nicest plot of land for my future home, so I decided to go see the city before I went into the maze. That was that. I buoyantly walked toward the gate in the second well.

The people of Gordeau Empire spoke proudly of the city streets, calling the city the “Millennium Tree.” Centered on the white, shining imperial castle was a series of nine walls of concentric circles. If you looked at the city from the sky, the walls looked like the rings in a tree trunk.

In the beginning, the city was actually just a town, so small it couldn’t even be considered a country. Over time, people started to gather as they heard rumors about the maze. The walls were built to protect the homes as they began to spread out, and that’s how the Ring Walls came to be. They stood as a symbol of the Millennium Empire, the pride of the people. They were popular among travelers, and it wasn’t uncommon to see someone trying to carve their name into one of the older inner walls only to be caught by the guards and hit with a hefty fine.

Not everything about the Ring Walls was positive. Originally, the walls were intended to act as shields to protect the people against invaders, but now they were divisions between the affluent and poor. The first section, in the center, was the imperial palace. The second section was for royalty’s mansions, and the third was for the higher-ranked nobles’ villas. Essentially, traveling inward landed you among residences of those with higher status and riches. The farther you went the other way, the poorer the people were. There were clear lines marking the divides.

The ninth section, the outermost ring, was in fact called “the Outskirts,” home to the entrance to the maze. Originally, it had been in a sweet spot:

separated from the city for safety reasons but not so far that it would be too hard to get to. Over a millennium, the city had continued to expand and eventually the entrance became enclosed in the city walls.

While the entrance was technically within the city, there wasn't anything surrounding it. There was only a stone shrine built a thousand years ago and a guard hut for the soldiers who watched the entrance, both sitting in the expanse. The hut had been built as a safeguard in case the impossible happened, and monsters flooded out of the maze, but that hadn't happened even once in the Empire's entire thousand-year history. That's why the two guards who stood at the maze entrance had time on their hands. Today was no exception.

"Okay, so this one is a classic. So this guy, Dick, went into a brothel 'cause he wanted to spend five silver to have a good time with a pretty little lady. But get this, the chick that comes out is his *own mother*!"

"Ha-ha-ha, I don't even want to joke about that." The younger, newer guard faked a laugh in response to the middle-aged soldier's joke. He'd heard the same story three days before, but he wasn't dumb enough to ruin his work relationships by pointing that out.

"It's no joke. It's one hundred percent the truth. So then Dick screams, and—Oh."

The middle-aged guard saw some figures approaching from the distance, stopped his story, and straightened his posture. But the second he saw that they were familiar adventurers, he called out to them in a casual manner.

"Yo, Brook. Have ya finished paying off that resurrection you had the other day?"

"As if. I'm going to make the money for that right now."

"Ha-ha, I'll bet ya one silver that you go too far and end up more in debt."

"Oh yeah? Well, you better get ready, 'cause I'm coming back in one piece this time." The swordsman named Brook seemed to be the leader of the group. He led the party of five adventurers down the long stairs into the maze.

The new guard watched them go, then said in admiration, "Wow. I can't believe you actually remember the names of all the adventurers."

"Well, it's really just the names of the party leaders. Like, you remember that lizardman from before, right? I can't remember his name no matter what."

"There are some races with names that are hard to pronounce."

The young guard would find out later that the lizardman in question had an incredibly difficult name—Eustreptospondylus. "Anyway, it's hard enough just to remember the name and face of the leader."

"I guess. There are some who give up the moment I think I've got their name down."

Some of those adventurers had retired because they felt like they'd hit their limit, but others had been killed in the maze. Unfortunately, their

bodies couldn’t be recovered, which meant they couldn’t be resurrected and remained dead forever.

“You know, once you’ve been at this job for as long as me, you’ll be able to tell who’ll quit right away, just by looking at their face.”

“Hmm, I’m not surprised you’d be good at that.” The new guard was half honest, half just flattering his senior.

That seemed to put the middle-aged guard in a good mood. “All right. Let’s bet on how many days it’ll take the next adventurer we see to quit. Winner gets ten gold.”

“Come on. There’s no way. I’m not an adventurer. I can’t bet away ten gold pieces!” Now he was being completely honest.

An adventurer could easily make that much money in a day, but it was a month’s wages for a simple guardsman. It wasn’t a sum he could gamble away lightly.

“Ha-ha-ha, I kid, I kid. How about we make it one gold?”

“That’s still a fortune…” The new guard sighed as the older one grabbed his shoulder, like he was trying to keep him from running.

“Fine, one silver.”

“I guess…,” he grumbled.

It was about the same amount of money he’d spend if he was to treat his coworker to dinner *and* drinks. It wasn’t insignificant on a guardsman’s salary, but if he needed to spend it to keep his working relationships positive, he had no choice.

When the middle-aged guard saw the other one nod reluctantly, he whistled happily. “There ya go! Oh, perfect timing. There’s someone I’ve never seen—”

As soon as he looked over, his face went as pale as a sheet. The new guard gazed up to see what exactly was going on, and he saw darkness.

“Urgh!” A pathetic little shriek came out of his throat, but the middle-aged guard who was always teasing him didn’t even laugh. He was too stiff for that.

The figure was a knight wearing armor so wicked-looking it froze the veteran guard who’d seen thousands of adventurers. A black miasma oozed from the dark armor, and cracks ruptured the earth with every step, kicking dust into the air. The eyes, set in a wicked helm that looked like a copy of the devil’s face, shone maliciously like they craved blood. A single swing of the massive blood-red great sword on his back would be enough to split the guard’s body in half.

“Ah, aah…” The new guard stood there trembling, unable to even run in the face of this beast that looked like death itself.

The knight in his black armor walked up to the guards, who stood there frozen in their disgraceful fear, and then…bowed slightly in greeting before heading down into the maze.

“Huh?” The new guard stood there, eyes wide like saucers from the shock, as he watched the knight descend the stairs.

Beside him, the middle-aged guard dramatically let out a heavy breath. “Pheeew… Wh-what was that?! It was almost like those rumors—”

“Uhhh, well, he was an adventurer, right?”

“Well I’ve never seen anyone like that!”

“So a newbie?” asked the new guard, and the middle-aged guard let out a large *huff*—a little too loud—like he was trying to overcompensate for his pathetic behavior from a moment before.

“Hmph, don’t be an idiot. There aren’t even sixth-floor adventurers with an aura like that.”

In the thousand years that adventurers had been trying to conquer the maze, no one had ever found the bottom. The farthest people could currently get to was the sixth floor. A sixth-floor adventurer was the greatest hero in all humanity—hands down.

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